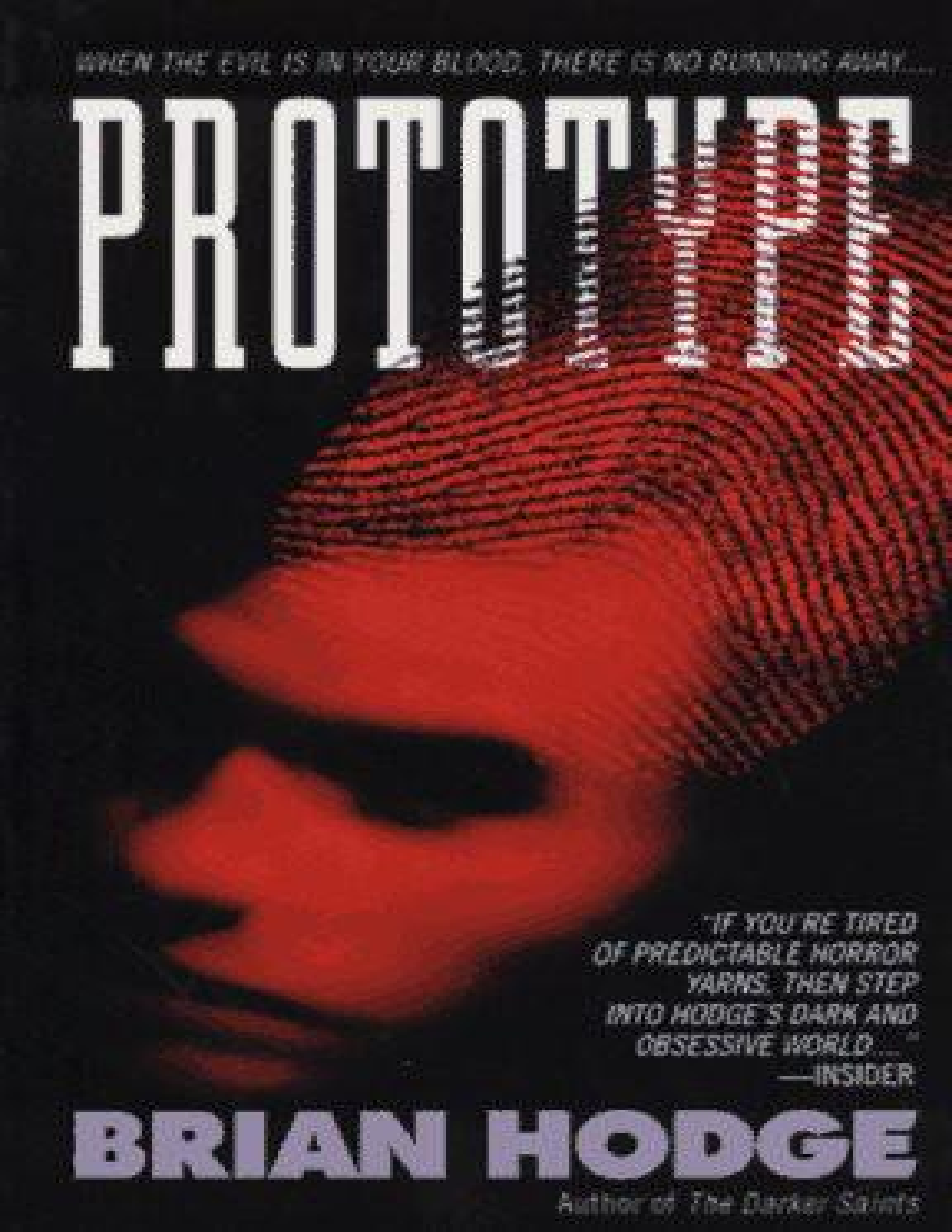
WHEN THE EVIL IS IN YOUR BLOOD, THERE IS NO RUNNING AWAY....

PROTOTYPE



"IF YOU'RE TIRED OF PREDICTABLE HORROR YARNS, THEN STEP INTO HODGE'S DARK AND OBSESSIVE WORLD..."
—INSIDER

BRIAN HODGE

Author of *The Darker Saints*

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PROTOTYPE

by Brian Hodge

MACABRE INK

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This book is a work of fiction. Characters, incidents, and dialogue are drawn from imagination and are not to be construed as real, or are otherwise used fictionally. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars,
But in ourselves, that we are underlings.
— William Shakespeare
If you can't be a good example, then you'll
just have to be a horrible warning.
— Catherine Aird

For Doli —
for too many reasons
to list on one page;
but a lot of them are
in the ones that follow.

Foreword to the Second Edition, by John Shirley

This is a foreword; it is supposed to tell you things about a book before you read it. But no author wants someone else to spoil his story or tell the reader: “This is what it is all about, man, this is the true meaning that I will now reveal unto you…”

So I’m not going to do that in my foreword.

Of course you can always write about how the book came about … but I have no idea how it came about.

A lot of forewords are about the foreworder’s personal relationship to the author, how you go back years together and have shared many deep thoughts or at least a lot of beers.

I know Hodge, but not well. At least one of the conventions we were both at I’ve even tried to block out of my memory (or possibly my brain damage blocked it out) and my agent, who knows Hodge better than I do, had to remind me about it. Anyway, I’ve never bonded with him in that collegial way that writers sometimes do. I also never bonded with him, in the bad old days, by waking up in the same pool of puke in a back room somewhere. (At least, I don’t *think* that was Hodge.)

I know Hodge only from his work and, frankly, I haven’t read a great deal of it. Don’t take that wrong. The fact that I’ve read *any* of it at all is a real compliment. I don’t read much fiction at all and even less that can be considered “genre” fiction. This is not unusual, by the way. I don’t think my friend Tim Powers has read any genre fiction published in the last thirty or so years, unless it’s by Jim Blaylock. (Well, he read my *Demons,* but I’m not sure he considered that “genre”.) I understand Clive Barker will not read fiction of any kind when he is himself writing fiction.

But I have read some of Hodge’s work and I know he’s a damned good writer. He’s also a damned *dark* writer. He illuminates our own personal darknesses by showing us the darker dark. And this book, *Prototype*, is, as far as I know, the darkest thing he’s ever written. It is as if, after he wrote this one, he saw some light himself and never needed to go back down to this depth.

Clay Palmer, the strange mutant character in *Prototype*, is the ultimate misfit, a freak, a man in whom the worst human aggression is heightened past all endurance, multiplied to the point of unquenchable, consuming rage that must result in the destruction of others and of himself. Wait — was Hodge writing about me, when I was, like, 25? No, he didn't know me then. But he's writing about all youthful male alienation, when it's alienation keyed to the point of igniting rage. And in this case, igniting something else…

But even though he is what he is, Palmer still has a choice. He wants to "rise above" what he is.

It always struck me that in, say, the movie *Blade Runner*, as in the Phil Dick novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* underlying that film, the rebellious androids were really stand-ins for humanity, for everyone angry, secretly or out front, about mortality; angry that they are brought into the world to live and learn and then must die before having a real chance to live, a chance to really learn. And in *Prototype* Palmer seems to me to represent everyone who finds themselves hating what they are — at least at first — until they learn to understand their true nature. And that's most of us, at least at some point — most of us, if only as insecure adolescents, but often later in our lives, too — look at ourselves with profound dissatisfaction. Why was I this and not that? I was intended to be an Olympic skater! Or: I was supposed to be a scientist! Or: Why'd I waste my life training to be an Olympic skater, when really I wanted to be a scientist? I was supposed to be smart or slim or witty or talented or a much kinder person people would like and cherish and…

But what I am is … what I am. And we go through a process of finding out what we are. We model different versions, in high school and college — often in the process of trying this "major" and then shifting to that one, or going from studying philosophy to vocational school. We take adult classes to be more…something else. But eventually we work out who we are.

Most good science-fiction, you see, is about something other than what it immediately seems to be about. The best science-fiction or horror is metaphor — it's a great story, as this book is, but it also resonates on some deeper level for us. *Prototype* resonates with questions of identity and what it means to be human.

People tend to sleepwalk through their lives. If they become aware of it, they either try to go deeper asleep — maybe by drinking, taking drugs, spending half their lives in role-playing games online — or they struggle to wake up. A motivator for waking up is wanting to change. To become master of oneself. To do that, you have to be able to make choices. Sleepwalking, knee-jerk people can't make choices. Somewhere in *Prototype* is an understanding of just those issues — to change, you have to wake up enough to see yourself as you really are. Then — maybe. You have to accept who you are … but there's always another possibility. The chance for evolution…

At one point, Clay and his kind are called "outsiders adrift in societies for which they have more contempt than love." Some writers are like that or at least writers like me — maybe Hodge too. Others are more like the Impressionist artist, Willard Metcalf, whose "The White Veil" Palmer describes as, "Fuzzy, soft focus … diffused. Even though that's a winter scene, it's still warm." Writers who write dark fiction are more like Clay's artist friend, Graham, whose work reflects a harsher — and more relevant — truth in which you can find a perverse beauty.

It is not that writers of dark fantasy and sf cannot see beauty or have no hope or feel such things are irrelevant. It's that we know that making that choice to rise above, to be aware and awake, is not easy. Once the choice is made, you have to continue to choose and that is more difficult still. Writers like Hodge know that and they aren't going to lie to you and make it soft and fuzzy. Sometimes we are even going to be, well, a little extreme.

Just a little, though, because people like Hodge and myself aren't nihilists. We might be accused of that — punk rock is often labeled nihilistic and I've been known to be a punk rocker — but we know better. That fictional artist, Graham, is a nihilist and he creates a work of art that is as extreme as it gets: The Dream of Kevorkian. I'll let you discover just where Hodge sees nihilism taking an artist.

There's nothing soft or fuzzy about *Prototype*. Oh it has its touching moments — the lesbian relationship between Adrienne and Sarah is as real and nuanced and sophisticated as any I've read. Pretty good coming from a male. Not something I'd try — and he pulled it off.

When *Prototype* was first published it had the word "horror" on its spine. I imagine you'd still call it horror now too but keep in mind as you

read this book that if this had been a generic horror novel, Hodge would have told his story more or less like this: Clay is a monster. Maybe it is not his fault he's a monster, but he is one, so he is, therefore, evil. His doctor, Adrienne, wants to help him not be a monster. In a conventional horror novel they might even fall in love because the power of love might save the day. (Besides women, in that sort of book are only allowed to be good or bad themselves. And she's a scientist, and there's only good or bad science.) But, one way or another there would be a confrontation between "good" and "evil." Good will more or less win, one way or another, because that's how those stories are supposed to work.

Note that Hodge does just about everything a writer can do to avoid that formula and he does it in many different ways. But few of them are simple ways. A simple way would have been pull a reverse — good is evil, evil is good. He plays with that concept with a character, Patrick Valentine, who quotes Nietzsche a lot and seems to think that the "monsters" here represent the "atavism of a more ancient world" and that monstrosity is inevitable.

In the end, well, you'll have to decide about the ending of this book yourself, but I think you may find that you will feel every character has made a key mistake, made at least one wrong choice at some turn. Long before reaching the conclusion you'll also understand that the world itself and society, in *Prototype*, is the end sum of humanity's many mistakes. (There's not a lot about the nonfictional world that doesn't support that idea.)

In fiction, you write resolutions. There is an end. At most, like here, there is an epilogue. As a reader, you close the cover and there is no more. The End. Choices, mistakes, consequences — all over. Whatever impression that writer is going to make has been made.

And Brian Hodge makes a lasting impression with *Prototype*.

Life's not like a novel. We don't write our lives and resolve our dilemmas so easily. But *Prototype* will at least lead you to consider the higher questions … questions that have a secret relevance to your own life.

John Shirley
February 15, 2006

PART ONE/RUST

It pointed to the generation of all these creeds. They were assertions, not arguments; so they required a prophet to set them forth… Their birth set them in crowded places. An unintelligible passionate yearning drove them out into the desert.

— T.E. Lawrence

The Seven Pillars of Wisdom

One

After the calm, Adrienne looked in on her patient, up from Emergency and now in his room. He was at such peace, and she marveled: The difference between the countenance of a devil and that of an angel is sometimes nothing more than sleep.

It was an archaic association, the kind she would always have to keep to herself. How many fellow psychologists, colleagues and mentors alike, would frown upon such medieval terminology? Angels, devils; good, evil; black, white … no such things. The modern age had sounded the death knell for such absolutes.

There existed but chaos and order, illness and health.

But if the metaphor fits … apply it.

The patient, peaceful now, lay beneath the precautionary restraints across his bed. He was, so far, without name, without history. He was nothing but symptoms and wounds. An IV line snaked into one arm to boost fluid levels; he was suffering from mild dehydration. He had been brought in without ID, and the police had been unable to take fingerprints even after he'd been sedated into sleep: Both hands were heavily stitched, splinted, and bandaged.

Adrienne held little hope for a lucid talk with him tomorrow. Only someone suffering from extreme personality disturbances would not only break his own hands on another's face, but continue to pummel away until jagged fragments of his own metacarpals protruded from his hands in compound fractures.

The patrol officers who had brought him in earlier tonight, in restraints, told her that he had been picked up on the east side of Tempe, at a shopping strip. That he had spent a good deal of time in the Arizona desert seemed a reasonable deduction. There had been sand and dust inside his boots, with his jacket and jeans heavily coated as well. According to the police, witnesses to the altercation that had landed him here said that three skateboard thugs had tried to relieve him of his wallet as he was leaving a

Tex-Mex stand. All three of them, ironically, had been brought in as even more deserving emergency cases.

Comical enough in its beginnings, Adrienne supposed: The kid who'd snatched the wallet from their John Doe's hand had been knocked from his skateboard by a well-aimed sack of tacos to the head. After which the victim had become the aggressor. He had snatched up the upended skateboard and used its flat, wide top to shatter its owner's nose.

The melee was joined at once by the other two, valiantly altruistic musketeers, the both of them — in their own eyes, at least. Adrienne well knew that boys in their late teens listened far more readily to testosterone than to common sense.

And they had paid dearly. Between the three of them, their tally of injuries was headed by a broken jaw, two broken noses, nine missing teeth, one shattered elbow, two ruptured testicles, a skull fracture, thirteen broken ribs. One would be urinating blood for days. Then there were the punctures and lacerations caused by the bones protruding from John Doe's hands.

Adrienne, as a staff psychologist, had not treated them, had scarcely even seen them. Her understanding of the hapless trio's fate was mainly appraisal from colleagues working the night shift. While grievous injuries they were, Adrienne found it difficult to sympathize. Three-on-one was *such* an act of vicious cowardice. She despised the pack mentality — an evolutionary carry-over, perhaps, still buried in the primal brain, but a behavioral anachronism. Like a burst appendix, it could cause only misery. Surely human beings were better than that, somewhere within, weren't they?

Apparently their John Doe, bruised and battered but the last one on his feet, had attempted to lurch away from the scene, and even then had needed two police officers to subdue him. His bone-razor hands were secured behind his back and in he came, 9:22 P.M. this September midweek night. He was an immediate code blue, all available able-bodied personnel converging on the ER entrance to make sure he hurt no one else or did no more damage to himself. His hands may have been bound, but he had feet. And teeth. And a seemingly bottomless reservoir of ferocious energy — adrenaline, most likely. A later blood test checked negative for presence of drugs.

Drugs had, in the end, been their only recourse to stop him. He nearly had to be submerged in Thorazine before it took effect.

Adrienne had witnessed, had felt an unexplained sorrow after the final plunge of the needle into exposed arm, a drama played out by nearly a dozen participants — oh, *here* was a pack in action. Watching John Doe's struggles dwindle to twitches, and the fury fade from his eyes as they shut, yet even then still seemed to hate, she had thought of animals she'd seen on documentaries beyond number: fine and noble predators such as lions and tigers and panthers, enraged at the sting of the dart in their hip, and given to spectacular acrobatics even as consciousness ebbed. At the end, wobbly and confused, they invariably seemed like nothing so much as cubs, clumsy and mystified. And then they fell.

John Doe … where *did* you come from, and where were you going? And what demons followed you within?

Demons in, of course, a wholly figurative sense.

She kept that to herself too.

*

Adrienne had but a half-hour remaining on her shift, and it went peacefully enough. Midnight came and she knocked off duty but had little desire to leave the hospital. Ensconced in her office, she rang home and got the machine; left a message that she had a patient for whom she wanted to be on-site whenever he came around, and would probably be home later in the morning.

Silence, then. Was any place so quiet as a hospital office after midnight? Off came her shoes and she wiggled her feet for a moment, felt full circulation restore; then she cranked the Levolor blinds into a barrier and raised her slacks' legs to peel away her knee-highs.

She dropped to sit on the couch. That was the great thing about her chosen career — always a place to sleep. Adrienne shut her eyes and did some slow, deep breathing, let the day and tonight's shift ease out of her one lungful at a time. Directly across the office, centered between packed bookshelves, she kept hung a large square print of a landscape from early American impressionism, Willard Metcalf's *The White Veil*. She regarded it as mildly hypnotic, so serene she could nearly hear the whisper of its falling snow. It was easy to lose herself in the painting every time, wander down its blanketed hillsides to the valley below, and even the bleakness of its bare

trees seemed softened beneath a milky gray sky. Such a glaring contrast to the stark desert landscape that surrounded her waking world, and she supposed that was a large part of its appeal. Perhaps she was being quietly obstinate.

Adrienne reached over the couch and took down a Navajo blanket from the wall clips that held it in place. Off with the light, and she curled herself on the couch. Reached behind her head to unbind the straight blond hair she kept pulled back while on duty, and let it fall to just above her shoulders.

Beneath the blanket, she held her gaze across the office to the painting, pale luminescence in the office gloom. Let it sink in, be the last thing she saw before sleep, and perhaps she would dream of snow. The virgin autumn of late September was still plenty warm here, but winter was on its way, and still she would miss the winters of the north. Desert winters were never satisfying, in the schema of the birth-growth-death-rebirth cycle of the seasons.

She slept, and dreamed instead of ice, and factories where straggling drones stoked desperate, feeble fires until the last embers died, and then the drones fell, until they too lay frozen.

*

Buzzing, persistent and harsh enough to pierce sleep: her phone. Adrienne pushed aside the blanket and took several reeling steps to her desk and answered, barely coherent.

"Doctor Rand?"

"Mm. Yes." Blinking, widening her eyes, alternately; focus had to be somewhere.

"This is Beth Weatherford, down on five. You wanted to be notified as soon as your John Doe from last night came around?"

"Right, right, right…" Adrienne cleared her throat; could not yet make sense of her clock. "What time is it?"

"It's about seven-fifteen."

"What kind of emotional state is he in this morning?"

"Well, he's … quite calm, really. He's very lucid and aware."

Interesting. Adrienne thanked her, said she'd be down in a few minutes, asked to have an orderly make sure there was a chair in the room. Even before the phone was cradled she was reaching for the small curved combs she used to hold her hair back. She kicked into her shoes, and while she

never much liked the white coat, better that than it being so obvious she had slept in her clothes.

Down on five, Adrienne smiled briefly at the nurse who had buzzed her from the duty station, clicked a brisk walk down the hall. While some found Ward Five a nightmare zone, rarely did it bother her. It took a special breed to work here, amid the crises and breathing cautionary tales of lives in implosion. The schedule of the outside world and the pulse of circadian rhythms meant nothing here. Rooms might rebound with despairing moans and nonsensical conversations at any hour of the day.

Room 532. She knocked, entered. Wished, for a moment, that she'd thought to hunt for the breath spray somewhere in her desk drawer. Her mouth tasted stale.

Room 532, and its sole occupant … she found them both eerily calm, as if they belonged on another floor entirely. Certainly, the man's behavior and countenance were polar opposites of what they had been last night.

"Another new face," he said.

She smiled, hoped it came across as disarming. "That's odd. It looked like the same old thing to me this morning."

A bit lame, as wit went, but at least he didn't roll his eyes. Adrienne contended that, just as the first crucial five years of a child's life could set the tone for the remainder, the first several minutes of exchange between patient and therapist could determine everything to follow. Even minor missteps could blaze trails along terribly wrong paths.

She pulled the chair over from the wall, near the bed. Best to get to the same eye-level as soon as possible. Nobody liked dealing with someone towering over him the entire time. A tape recorder might be intimidating this soon, as well, and anyway, she didn't plan on covering ground any more complicated than what could be served later by memory and quick jottings in the notebook she slipped from her pocket.

"How are you feeling this morning?"

He shrugged with a tilt of his head and a constricted twitch of his shoulder. Beneath the restraints criss-crossing the bed, it was about all the body language he could manage.

"My name's Adrienne Rand," she said. "I'm a psychologist on staff here. I was on duty last night when you were brought in."

He nodded, almost matter-of-factly, gave a small sigh. Rolled his head away for a moment, to stare with flat eyes toward the window. Beyond the chain-link window guard and spots on the glass, there was nothing to see, nothing but brightening sky.

Lying there, calm, he looked smaller than he had when first brought in last night. Certainly too small to have inflicted the kind of damage he had on three assailants, and then require two police officers to subdue him. Average height and build, skinny hipped; she wondered how well he'd been eating lately. Black hair of moderate length, wildly unkempt now, with days' worth of beard stubble. His head and bruised, sunburned face were characterized by a curiously sleek appearance, with both contoured cheekbones and jawline that swept around to either side of his skull. It seemed a face engineered to lean into the wind, to cut resistance, to slice ahead. Adrienne found a strange beauty in it. As faces went, this one was fascinating. Last night's figurative assessment as she watched him sleep still held: His could be the seductive face of an angel or a devil. A single stroke by the artist — or a vandal — could tilt it in favor of one or the other.

"Do you know where you are?"

"If it's Friday, then this must be Tempe. Or didn't you have geography in mind?" His voice was low and even. Not inviting, but neither was it hostile. He tilted his head toward the meshed windows. "If *those* are any indication, I'd say I'm in a psycho ward. How'm I doing so far?"

Day, city, and facility. She nodded. "Three for three." She took a deep breath, tried to minimize the swell in her chest on the inhale. The spotlight was definitely on; without being too obvious about it, this man was sizing her up … her every move, every word. And if he'd had a way of picking through her every thought, no doubt he would be exercising that option, too.

"How much do you remember about last night, about why you were brought here? Do you have any recollection at all?"

Hooded gray eyes, lids drifting shut. For a moment they clenched as fiercely and tightly as fists. "I didn't finally kill someone, did I?"

Finally? He remembers something, definitely. "No, you didn't kill anyone."

He relaxed. "Well that's good news."

"How much *do* you remember about last night?"

"I remember losing my temper, but I'd say I was provoked. And I still never got to eat my tacos." He laughed, weakly. "Once the police got me here, hauled me out of the car … gets kind of fuzzy. I don't remember you." Suddenly those watchful gray eyes flashed upon the door. "Have I been charged with anything?"

"Not yet, not that I've heard."

"Think I will?"

"I couldn't say one way or the other, I'm sorry. Given the degree to which you … defended … yourself last night, I'm sure the police will at least be interested in some follow-up before any decision is made."

He rolled his head to face the window again. There, for the first time: what seemed to be a glimpse of genuine emotion, an ache in something far deeper than the shattered hands encased in heavy casts.

"As I said," she went on, "I was there when you were brought in last night. Both your hands had sustained compound fractures. It was necessary to give you Thorazine to prevent you from hurting yourself any more, or someone else."

"Did *you* shoot me with it?"

"No."

"*You* just watched." A flat statement, almost an accusation, then he smiled directly toward her with something like twisted pride. "It took a lot, didn't it?"

Adrienne hesitated, then agreed. "We thought you might have pocketed the first dosage. There was no discernable effect, really."

"It just takes a lot. I don't know why."

Definitely something to look into, once she had access to his case history, more background. He certainly didn't speak as if he were any stranger to the receiving end of crisis intervention.

"When you were brought in, you had no identification with you. So as far as who you are, I'm afraid I'm going to have to start from scratch. Could you tell me your name?"

"Clay Palmer." His mouth ticked. "Of the Gehenna Palmers."

She frowned. "Gehenna?"

"That's a mythical name for hell. It's a *joke*."

"And where *is* your home, Clay?"

"Home…" He looked at the ceiling, as if attempting to define the term. "I always thought of my home as my shell of skin. That way I'm never lost. But that's not what you mean. Is it?"

"This time I *did* have geography in mind … but we can get around to that later, too."

"I'll *bet*." He eyed her with a flicker of wicked mirth; he'd just baited her and he knew it. Whether he'd done it deliberately or not was the only thing that wasn't clear. "I'm from Denver."

After she got his address, he reeled forth a social security number and his birth date without any prompting. She'd have to double check later, but for now, would take his word for it that he was twenty-five years old.

"You did considerable damage to yourself last night, Clay. I wonder if you could tell me what was going through your mind at the time?"

"You mean what I was *feeling*?" Laughter, harsh and incredulous. "I'd say I was feeling extremely pissed off. Adrienne."

"Lots of people feel pissed off. Some of them even act on it. Very few of them go so far as to break their own hands."

He gazed down along his body, the casts engulfing his lower arms. "My hands, yeah, I miss them this morning. At the time, they were just … means to an end."

"What end was that?"

He sighed, looked very stricken and exhausted all at once. "I don't know … conquest?"

She took a quick breath and decided to steer this thing back to case history. "Had you ever been attacked like that before? That you remember?"

He let a small, ironic smile twist one corner of his mouth. "Like that, three-on-one … no … I don't — no, definitely not."

She had wondered last night, immediately upon learning the particulars of his case. Because his fight hadn't ended when all three assailants were on the ground, had it? In some convolution of his brain, he had seen reason to fight the police and emergency room personnel, too. Every reaching hand belonged to an enemy.

Not uncommon, though. When trauma had wrenched a life to its foundations, some people simply withdrew from all but the most overt stimuli. They could not differentiate foe from ally. She recalled the case of the jogger gang-raped and beaten in Central Park. Even having been

clubbed unconscious, the woman had flailed about and fought the trauma-center team while on the table.

But therein lay the difference: Clay Palmer had successfully fought his assailants and *still* gone past the brink of shutdown.

What had *happened* to him in the past, to generate such fear, such virulent rage? What lay buried like a bomb in that mind?

"Clay, is there anybody you'd like us to notify, that you're here, that you're safe?"

"Nobody. Adrienne."

Mental note: He was baiting her again, that name thing. The last two times she had called him by name, he'd turned around and done likewise, though in deliberately obvious fashion. Not quite sarcasm, not quite as afterthought … more like he was letting her know he wasn't going to be swayed by attempts to buddy up through co-opting his first name. She couldn't blame him, actually. Often as not, she associated the tactic with creepy salesmen she didn't want to deal with at all, much less buy from.

"Any family or friends in Denver, or locally…?"

"I said nobody."

Adrienne nodded. "If you change your mind, I'll be happy to take care of it for you. And convey any message you might like to pass along."

"Even if it's obscene?"

She maintained a level gaze, even returned his earlier wry smile. "I'll let discretion play the better part of judgment."

"Just checking. Probing the bounds of your honor." For a moment his gaze roved about the room, this cheerless and spartan chamber, and through his eyes she sought the human being behind them. When he wasn't looking at her, wasn't playing the role of guardian at the gate of his privacy, he seemed to drift upon small painful currents within. If only she could see him free and unencumbered, observe how he moved, how he sat. How he might enter a room and commandeer it for his own, or find its most sheltered corner and make it his harbor. The body told much … but his was silenced. And in its restriction, it was as if his eyes were compensating by what they communicated, like sharpened hearing to the newly blind.

But this she knew: He would not be the type who found it easy to ask for help. Which didn't mean he was not without other questions: "How old are you?"

Adrienne saw no harm in answering. "I'm thirty-four."

"Baby boomer, huh?"

She couldn't help but smile. "Just barely. In that bulging demographic chart that looks like a pig in a python, I'm pretty much at the pig's curly little tail." And on that cusp, Adrienne supposed, she did not truly belong to the body proper. Cut off the pig's tail, and it may squeal, but it will never miss the thing. She was a vestigial appendage, with no generation to call her own. She lived in the temporal gulf between those who came before and those who followed.

"The boomers," he said. "Our civilization's last big gasp of self-indulgence. At least I know *my* place."

"And where's that?"

"I'm with the people on the side, holding the shovels." Clay Palmer cleared his throat. "Are we through?"

"Yes. I think that's enough for now." Adrienne stood, put away her notebook. "About all we've done this morning is introduce ourselves. We've talked a bit about last night … but there's a lot that led up to last night that we never touched on. I think we should, and … I hope you feel the same. And I hope you'll want to continue talking with me later this weekend."

"Maybe," he said. "But no touching. I don't really like being touched. No touch therapy."

"All right." Adrienne nodded. Interesting: could indicate a past history of abuse, emotional withdrawal. "I think we can work around that."

He raised his hips and torso, pushing up off his shoulders until his body surged against the restraints. The twin casts lay along his sides, chunky anchors of white plaster. "Can you do something about getting these straps off me?"

She would first have to get an authorization from Ferris Mendenhall, the psychiatrist who oversaw all Ward Five treatment, but her own recommendation would be that Clay no longer needed to be restrained, for his own protection or anyone else's.

Still, not to forget: He had broken his own hands and used the ends of snapped bones to lacerate three faces. What damage might he be capable of inflicting with those casts, if he set his mind to it?

It was nearing eight o'clock, and Mendenhall should be in by now. It was his call.

"I'll look into it immediately," she said.
Sometimes it was a relief to defer responsibility.

Two

Adrienne was back in her own driveway by nine o'clock that morning, sitting behind the wheel for several moments after killing the engine. On the dry wind rode the creeping burn of the day. An all-nighter — sleep in her office notwithstanding — and still she found something decadent about dragging wearily in at this hour. Only the motivations had changed over time. Fifteen years ago it would have been the inevitable final surrender after a binge. Now, just more overtime devoted to a classic type-A personality's drive to alleviate the sufferings of humanity. By fifty, her lock on sainthood should be clinched.

She left the car, started for the front door.

Adrienne called it home, but after two years it still took some adjustment. Two floors of stucco topped with red-tile roofing, on a lot whose lawn was suitably sparse, as per desert climes, and at least one palm tree visible from nearly every window. Each time she came rolling down the street she expected to see a burro tied up out front.

Adrienne's own tastes ran more toward colonial and Victorian, but upon first setting foot inside when they'd looked at it, Sarah had loved it, and felt instantaneously at home here in that impulsive, predestined way she had about her sometimes. Adrienne figured, in her heart, that her own love would grow.

Still waiting. By now, she was probably up to at least an amiable affection for the place.

Sarah was in the front room when Adrienne came through the door, looked up from her book and brightened immediately. Uncurled from her cross-legged perch in the cushioned rattan chair that hung in one corner.

"Hiya," she said, and met Adrienne halfway to kiss hello, good morning, whatever they had skipped the night before. "Guess who missed you last night."

"You got my message, didn't you?"

"*Yes*, I got your message. I was just feeling needy." Sarah gripped her by the shoulders and steered her gently toward the sofa. "C'mon. Sit, sit, sit,

sit."

Adrienne shut her eyes and smiled and let fatigue overwhelm her, began to feel tired all over again. Let Sarah take charge — some indulgent pampering now and then was good for body and soul. Sarah stayed behind her, reaching across the back of the sofa and down to the shoulders that felt cramped and unnatural after sleeping on the office couch, and maybe from all that residual tension from her first encounter with Clay Palmer. With this one she wanted very much to tread wisely.

"Let it out, let it out," Sarah said, then nipped her on the ear. "Can you come out and play tomorrow? I think it's in your own best interests, you're looking too serious this week."

"Tomorrow being, what … Saturday?"

"Gasp — she's in touch with modern timekeeping after all."

Adrienne made a show of inner debate, but a day out on her day off sounded like a tonic she would be wise to self-prescribe. "Since it's you, and since you asked," she said. "What do you have in mind?"

Sarah was digging with strong and nimble fingers for each and every muscle at the base of Adrienne's neck. "I was thinking Swiss coffee and a French film and Greek food. It'll be very multicultural and don't you dare say no."

"*Multi*cultural? You know you're showing a definite centrism toward Western Europe."

"Shut up. Who's the anthropologist here?"

Sarah wrapped up her ministrations and slapped each of Adrienne's shoulders simultaneously, as if swatting the bottoms of newborns. Her shoulders sang, they hummed, they throbbed with vitality restored, and Sarah crawled over the back of the sofa to drop beside her.

Sarah was so physical sometimes, she came close to being overpowering — not by intimidation, more that to be around her was to risk either exhaustion by proxy or feelings of inadequacy. She had entirely too much life-force to contain; would throw herself into anything and everything that drew her interest and contend with the bruises or broken heart later.

Sarah was slim and straight above the waist, with lushly curved hips below. She had a round face almost too small for her eyes, and mismatched lips that somehow went with her body: the top one thin, the lower, heavy

and ripe and delicious, the both of them bracketed by smile lines that inscribed her mouth like soft little parentheses. Her full black hair she brushed irregularly, and she scuffed around on wide peasant feet, a legacy from a barefoot childhood. At twenty-nine, Sarah still distrusted shoes.

They molded together well, Adrienne four inches taller, and when they embraced, every gentle swell in one seemed to meet with a corresponding hollow in the other. Side-by-side they looked to be complementary opposites, Sarah very much the child of a fecund earth, while there was something mildly Teutonic about Adrienne … in the fine blond hair, so very straight, and the murky blue eyes; in the height that once caused her to slouch until the boys caught up, then began to surpass her. But it worked; together *they* worked, and Adrienne had recently decided she loved Sarah enough that it ached.

She supposed that was a good thing. To gauge the quality of life, there often seemed no better barometer than the measure of its pain. I've seen the highs, I've seen the lows, now how about I linger upon the middle plateaus awhile and sort it out?

"I came up with another maybe for my thesis this morning." Sarah beamed with the enthusiasm that inevitably came when something dawned upon her, its avenues of possibility yet to be explored. "Want to hear it?"

Adrienne laughed. "How many will this *make*, anyway?"

"Five. Want to hear it?"

"I'd rather hear that you've made up your mind."

Sarah jabbed out and pinched her along the ribs. "Do you want to hear it or not?"

Adrienne slid down onto the sofa and flung off both shoes. "Dazzle me."

"Retention in American society of old world customs by Asian immigrants." She frowned. "That's still too simplistic for the final approach. But I think it's something I could really devour. Plus it's something that feels contemporaneously relevant, you know … not just something I can get eggheaded about that doesn't address anything going on right now in our own backyard."

"Asian immigrants," said Adrienne. Nit-picking, but sometimes that's what Sarah needed; she tended to view panoramas at the expense of details. "You know Fishbine will make you narrow your focus." Her faculty adviser in the doctoral program at Arizona State University; generally easygoing

but he tolerated no shotgun approaches and had no patience with indecision. At least he was not prone to imposing his own research needs on the agendas of his students; Sarah was fortunate in that respect.

"I know he will. Japanese, Chinese, Korean, Vietnamese, Thai … I have no idea which one I'd end up preferring."

"You *wouldn't* prefer one above the other, that's why you can't make up your mind."

Sarah leaned back and probed Adrienne's thigh with her toes. "We only get one full life … if that much. Is it my fault if it all looks so interesting?"

"You and your experiential smorgasbord." Adrienne smiled, grabbed Sarah's foot, and began to massage it, digging her thumbs into the arch where she knew Sarah liked it best. "I wish I could extract that mania from you and inject it into about half the patients I see. We'd cure thousands from depression."

"And make millions." Sarah shuddered, froze, held her foot still. "Right there … yes. *Yes!*" She hurled herself backward along the length of the sofa and threw both arms across her face with a satisfied groan. "What would you inject into the other half?"

"Probably your hedonism."

"Rome fell," she said, and groaned again, "but what fun it must have been at the time, you know?"

A few minutes later Adrienne got up to change into shorts and a T-shirt. They breakfasted on the back patio, grapefruit juice and day-old muffins from a favorite bakery. When Sarah returned to her chair in the front room and her book — an autobiographical account of a Japanese woman's transition and adjustment to life under the thumb of American culture — Adrienne showered away the last of her night's shift. Let her at least make a clean break before it all began again at four o'clock this afternoon.

Sarah had left the bedroom blinds down after rising, to keep the sun out, so the room was still cool. The unmade bed sat in a low frame, and Adrienne crawled into it, set the alarm for two-thirty, although she might not need it at all; how one human body could be so tired but not sleepy still made little sense to her.

Staring up then, focusing on the slow hypnotic revolution of the ceiling fan, whirling, whirling, as if to lift the entire room away. Like Dorothy, cast on the winds toward Oz. It beat counting imaginary sheep.

Alone in the bedroom on days like this, sleep could never be too quick in claiming her; days warm outside and cool in, the sun glowing brightly around the edges of the drawn blinds, and filling every crack until it became more than light, it was a luminescent presence trying to assert itself and intrude.

And did it ever take her back.

Three years and chump change ago, she had been a different Adrienne Rand. In fact, she'd not been Adrienne Rand at all, but Adrienne Wythe, a name now entirely foreign to her. Marriage had been, well … adequate, certainly. She recalled relishing the assurance of someone being there to come home to, and in turn to be there for someone else. In that sense her marriage was certainly secure; but then again, so are prisons, so there you are.

Why, with all the training and fieldwork to hone those skills in pinpointing everything wrong with a stranger's life, was her own inner vision confined to hindsight? The paradox of the trade, she supposed. She and Neal never should have married; went through six months joined by love, and the rest by inertia alone. Like a pair of asteroids that never once touch, yet still hurtle through the black voids in tandem, linked by their own peculiar gravity.

In those days even her base of home and career was different. She had been born in San Francisco, and it seemed perfectly reasonable to expect she would eventually die there, or at least across the bay in Oakland. In the meantime, S.F. General was apt to provide all the therapeutic and research opportunities she could want. She showed a particular flair for handling violent types, and S.F. General indulged her; there was no shortage.

Adrienne had never put much credence in fate. Fate was just a convenient, catchall term for moments of truth when the laws of probability met in random collision, and left people to pick their way through the wreckage. And so it had happened, over a week's time, that the staff of S.F. General fell by the dozens to a nasty strain of summer flu. Long hours, lowered resistance — enter the virus, stage left, and her turn came. Simple cause and effect, but how tempting to believe the universe that day was plotting. Whether to try to crush her in disillusion, or liberate her at last, Adrienne had yet to decide. The universe was funny that way.

No matter. In the long run, she was glad it had happened.

She timed her commute home between bouts of wretched upheaval and pulled into the driveway in time to christen it with bile. Ahead of her was Neal's car, the Nissan sitting there alone — what's wrong with this picture? *This* time of day? Perhaps he had fallen victim to the same viral prankster, and she decided she'd best enter as quietly as possible. Neal ill was Neal near death, to hear him moan on about it.

As it was, such consideration became quite unwarranted. Once in the house, Adrienne had tiptoed halfway up the stairs to the second floor and the bedroom before her ears conceded the obvious: Neal was *not* alone.

They had no idea Adrienne was there, apparently no idea she *could* be there, ever. Their abandon was total, and for at least a full minute Adrienne watched from the hallway. Who the woman was, she didn't know, and even after she had the name days later, it was no one Adrienne had heard of. Healthy, though, and even Neal seemed possessed of a certain robust exuberance that he otherwise lacked in their own bedroom encounters. They were on their knees, the woman lowered to elbows as Neal coupled with her from behind, the both of them golden and glowing in shafts of sunlight that pierced the room through drawn blinds. They looked like an ad for vitamin E.

My bed. That's my bed, Adrienne had thought. Perfectly calm, ungodly calm, every thought and impulse under control. *Shouldn't I at least hate them and start screaming?*

She left the hall, quietly, and eased down the stairway and back out the front door and stood for a few moments overlooking a lawn so green and smooth a golfer could have used it for putting practice. She disconnected a hundred-foot coil of garden hose from the lawn sprinkler, then reattached the regular nozzle head. Went back in the house, trailing the hose after her like some snake that just kept coming, sliding through the doorway and up the stairs.

Neal and the mystery woman still didn't notice she was there, not until she unleashed the fury of the hose upon them. It was the most humiliating form of coitus interruptus she could devise on the spur of the moment, wetting them down not like husband and mistress, but rather a pair of mongrels rutting on the front lawn.

After that day, she refused to see him without having first consulted a lawyer about it. And whenever, in the ensuing battle over communal

property, she was prone to despair with frustration over Neal's own legal firepower, one recollection of him on his side, legs kicking impotently, screeching apologies and clutching his privates from the bruising force of the spray, was usually enough to bring a smile. And perspective…

Still more of which came later when she realized that the whole of northern California had a taint, and might for years to come. Too lush, too hilly, too many secret enclaves in the land itself where she might run to contemplate the changes wrought in her life, only to find she was hiding from herself, as well.

She wanted — needed — a simpler, less cluttered environment for a while. The austerity of the desert beckoned, clean and wind-scoured, like a cleared foundation on which to rebuild. Arizona would do nicely, and if she wasn't yet convinced she wanted to die here, she nevertheless owed this place debts she could never pay.

Here was where she relearned that love need not stifle, nor grow complacent; that passion need not grow stale. That you really could link hands and hearts with another, whose life became a precious complement to your own. As long as there was love, there was life, and Arizona was just fine that way.

Sarah was from here, after all, and that counted for much.

The ancient Middle East wasn't the only place where saviors walked in the desert.

Three

Even in her off-hours, of which there were many that weekend, Adrienne frequently found her thoughts turning to Clay Palmer, and the mysteries buried inside him: poisons in need of draining, psychological boils awaiting the lance.

On Friday, Ferris Mendenhall had okayed the removal of Clay's restraints. Later that day he'd prescribed a regimen of lithium to get Clay stabilized and defuse any aggressive tendencies he might still harbor. He was already on pain medication for his hands, but Mendenhall preferred taking no chances; for someone who liked to use his fists, those casts were tantamount to giving him a pair of bludgeons.

Shortly thereafter the tide of paperwork began.

The name and other information Clay had given her had been verified and his records accessed from two Denver-area hospitals. All dated from the past four years, though along with these came records from Minneapolis, compiled over the several years prior to his relocation to Denver. On Sunday, Adrienne came in to her office an hour early to go through it all, uninterrupted.

Eleven times over the past seven years he had made trips to emergency rooms; stitches in his shoulder, his thigh, his cheek; a few broken bones — ribs alone, three times — and once a dislocated elbow. In Minneapolis he had thrice been brought in for alcohol poisoning. Twice in Denver he had been involuntarily committed for a week of psychological evaluation, then released. Lithium had been prescribed once before, and Carbamazepine another time, in an attempt to combat poor impulse control, but there was no follow-up to see how these affected him, or even if he had taken them on any regular schedule.

One scribbled note caught her attention: *Some resistance to Thorazine*.

The dry understatement of the weekend.

In his evaluations, Adrienne found brief passages of interest: *Professes an inability to form close interpersonal attachments yet still speaks with affection of a small number of friends ... reports frequent sleep*

disturbances, with insomnia and night terrors most common ... exhibits preoccupation with undergoing vasectomy ... spent 5 1/2 hours in apparent self-induced trance this afternoon but emerged with full knowledge of break — schizophrenia not indicated ... body exhibits scars from self-mutilation but all appear to date from patient's teens, with no recent manifestations visible.

Still, the bulk of it was simplistic and cursory and nothing she hadn't already surmised from having spent ten minutes with him the morning after a violent spell.

If only his mind had been treated as thoroughly as his body. Typical.

Since it had required the police to get him to the hospital in the first place, Adrienne also had the local force obtain a transcript of his record from Denver. It was nothing she didn't already expect: primarily a history of petty violent altercations in which he was lucky enough that no one was seriously injured. On three separate occasions he had done a month or two of jail time for misdemeanor assault. Fined for discharge of a firearm in his apartment. Some property damage, as well. Arrested last year for demolishing a BMW with a length of pipe; charges dropped due to lack of evidence. Arrested three years ago for breaking four glass display-case windows in a convenience store; charges dropped because of failure to establish positive ID.

And where there were records, odds were there were incidents never reported.

I didn't finally kill someone, did I? he had asked.

No. He hadn't. But the probability that he was headed in that direction was too likely. One slip of his broken hands the other night, and a jagged shank of exposed bone could easily have opened someone's jugular or carotid.

Prime objective: The last thing she was going to do was repeat the mistakes of her predecessors. It wasn't enough to look over Clay Palmer for a few days, pronounce him competent to deal with the outer world, prescribe some pills he may not even bother taking, and send him back into the feeding frenzy of modern society.

She closed the files.

Adrienne tapped a fingernail on her desktop and took a long look at herself, the mirror inside. This growing interest in her mysterious

wandering pugilist wasn't merely a therapist's concern, was it? Admit it — the clinician was rising up within her too. Clay Palmer was part of an entire fascinating field ripe for study, something she had long been interested in, if not always actively. Sometimes the field seemed prevalent enough without having to seek it out. She'd grown up within a culture of accelerated war and its glorification, had been educated in a time when a campus rape no longer came as a surprise when announced on the morning news; she now lived in an age when in so many factions it had become socially acceptable sport to beat others half to death because of their ancestry or who they liked to sleep with or what god they prayed to, or didn't.

She could wallow in statistics and never tire of them. Ninety percent of violent crimes were committed by men. Each Super Bowl Sunday, domestic violence against wives and girlfriends made a leap averaging forty percent. The previous year, twenty-five percent of all deaths of males aged fifteen to twenty-four were by gunshot.

Why? She really wanted to know. Testosterone could shoulder only so much of the blame.

God bless — in a wholly non-denominational way — every woman who actively crusaded in opposition to violence against other women; but too many took such statistics and hammered them into a license to condemn all things male. It couldn't be that simple. Their outrage was understandable, but nothing was ever understood that way, much less resolved.

If she was seen as sympathizing with the enemy, so be it. Not every blow, regardless of the recipient's gender, was struck out of purely evil intent. She had observed too many perpetrators of violence an hour or two after the act, shedding genuine tears of anguish and resembling nothing so much as little boys, bewildered at what their growing bodies had been capable of.

Sometimes they hurt, too, these bringers of pain. They deserved to pay for their acts, yes, but how much better for everyone if they lived in a culture in which they were better able to understand such destructive impulses in the first place, and learn to master them. Preventative medicine — no crime, no victim.

Adrienne had to wonder if her renewed fascination with violence in men didn't coincide with the dissolution of her marriage and the subsequent lapsing — for the time being, at least — of the hetero side of her sexuality.

Since she had initiated divorce proceedings against Neal, she had gone to bed with only one other man, a dreadful one-night stand born as much of wine as of desire. Since moving to Tempe, and with Sarah's eventual entrance into the picture two and a half years ago, she'd not even had any real impulse to make it with another man.

Was she sufficiently distanced from intimacy with men that now they had assumed the fascinating aura of creatures to be studied? Perhaps so. Live in a rain forest, and you take it for granted; live in a city, and that forest exudes a powerful allure to the explorer of terra incognita.

And for some explorers, there is no territory so enticing as that which can kill them.

Adrienne checked the time. A quarter past four. On duty and she didn't even know it. She picked up her phone and buzzed down to Ward Five.

"This is Dr. Rand," she said. "Could you have an orderly bring Clay Palmer up for his session?"

*

When Clay arrived, Adrienne almost had second thoughts about turning down the orderly's offer to linger behind; in his eyes was the implicit end of the offer — *just in case, you know*. It would have sent a poor signal, though. She wanted Clay to trust her? She had to trust him.

He looked drawn, tired, but reasonably well. Good color beneath his fading sunburn and nicks and bruises. He had been recently shaved, so most of that scruffy drifter quality had been sacrificed to the razor. The casts made the visible portion of his arms appear deceptively thin, the lean, ropy arms of a gangly teenager. His eyes flicked about the room, taking in decor here, books there, the layout in general. Cataloging, almost. She had met veterans of recent wars and skirmishes who did much the same: came into a room evaluating it for weapons and for cover. She briefly wondered if a military stint in his background had been overlooked, then decided no. He'd had no time, not with *that* file she'd just read.

"Where do you want me?" he asked.

She gestured. "Whichever you prefer. I just want you to be comfortable."

He chose the couch over either of the two plush chairs set before it, but would not recline; sitting, instead, with his back to the wall while she took a chair. She eased into the session with small talk — how are you feeling,

fine, how are your hands, *fine* — the little opening moments that could either be a cautious dance or a subtle sparring match.

She asked if he would mind if she recorded their conversation, and he said no. From her desk she took a small Sony, about half the size of a paperback book, and placed it on a table adjacent to them, set it rolling. She never understood counselors who used voice-activated recorders; even the duration of a pause could sometimes be more telling than words.

"This is the part where we start talking about my sex life and toilet training, isn't it?" His streamlined face was half-turned her way, his eyebrows mock-inquisitive arches.

"Only if they seem relevant."

"I'd say they are. These casts?" He lifted them, ponderous weights from which mere fingertips protruded. "I can barely aim myself steady enough to hit the toilet." A self-effacing little grin of embarrassment, but something about it rang hollow. "And I definitely can't whack off. Can I count on a little relief from you?"

"The last time I checked, that's not in my job description," she said. At times such as this she wished she wore glasses; nobody looks more like they mean serious business than someone tugging off glasses with one hand. She continued, voice even-tempered and professional: "A remark like that is way out of line and we both know you're aware of that. Dirty little propositions quit shocking me a long time ago, so if it's all the same to you, I'd rather get past that phase of *your* evaluation of *me*. Good enough?"

He did nothing for several moments, then grinned lazily down toward the couch with a single conciliatory nod. Whatever test that had been, it appeared that she'd passed.

So proceed.

"Neither of us brought this up on Friday morning, when we first spoke, but there's something I'm still wondering about. Not that it's necessarily important — more for my own curiosity. What brought you down this way from Denver?"

"I just wanted to get away by myself for a while."

"You wanted to be completely alone, then." More a statement of clarification than a question. You had to be careful with direct questions; too many and a session could turn into an interview that yielded facts, but ignored the richer vein of feelings.

"I wanted to get away from everything I was familiar with. So about a week and a half ago, I just left. You know how you go for a walk to think, to clear your head."

"If you wanted to be alone, you could have locked your door and not answered it, and unplugged your phone."

He cleared his throat, uncertainty shifting across his face. "I knew that wasn't going to be enough. Sometimes that *is* enough, it works … but it's a very passive way of going about it. Sometimes you need that distance. It didn't even seem right to drive it. So I didn't."

Adrienne eased forward in her chair. "Eight hundred miles is quite a walk to do some thinking."

"I had a lot to think about."

"And what was that?"

"Besides, I was hitchhiking some of the time. The way I see it, that's not cheating, that's allowed."

She said nothing — let the silence weigh upon him until he decided to do something about it. Her question hung there and he was perfectly aware of it; she could tell in a flicker of eye contact. What she could not yet discern was if his evasion was genuine, or one more little game.

Clay slid forward on the couch. The hospital robe bunched beneath his legs and he stood. Wandered across the office to stand before her print of Metcalf's *The White Veil* while she looked at his back, framed against the tranquil snowscape.

"Impressionism, right?"

"Yes."

"French or American?"

"American."

He nodded, still presenting his back to her. "I know this guy who's an artist. His work … it's nothing like this. He doesn't see the world this way."

"Is this a friend of yours?"

Slowly, Clay turned his back on the scene and returned to the couch. She decided his evasion, as well as his lengthy contemplation, were genuine.

"*Friend* is an outmoded concept, isn't it? Graham … I get along with him, I wish him well, I like his work. We … we protect each other in a way.

But I wouldn't even think of dying for him, so I don't think I'd make a very good candidate for friend, no."

Adrienne nodded. She could tell, for the time being at least, that the way to Clay's psyche was going to be a serpentine path. He did not seem to mind ruminating philosophically about matters, but dealing bluntly with his own feelings was a thornier task. She'd have to start out reading him mostly by his reactions to things. Pick away here and there and see what flaked away, like rust.

"Why don't you describe Graham's work to me. The things you like about the way he sees the world."

Clay shut his eyes a moment, moved as if to run one hand through his hair, then stopped. Her breath caught in her throat for an instant. A concussion, that's all he needed right now.

"His work doesn't present the world like that," waving one cast toward *The White Veil*. "Fuzzy, soft focus … diffused. Even though that's a winter scene, it's still warm. Why do you have it hanging there, anyway? That world's dead. Is this supposed to be some kind of memorial?"

She frowned. "'That world's dead' — I don't quite understand what you mean by that."

"Artistically, I mean. Been there, done that. Let's look at something relevant." Perhaps she was on the right track — Clay was starting to appear rather captivated. "Who honestly needs a snowy hillside anymore? It means nothing in terms of anyone's life. Maybe it meant something when it was painted, but now it's completely devoid of relevance."

"Some would say beauty exists for its own sake, regardless of its time."

"But most of the time it doesn't mean anything. It's like Marx's take on religion: an opiate. It's a false pat on the head to tell you not to worry, everything's fine."

"So, what you're saying about Graham's work is that it reflects, say, a harsher truth that you find to be more real."

"Right." He nodded. "Right. It's not metalwork, but a lot of it looks that way. Even though he uses oils, mostly, oils and acrylics. Looks very metallic. His paintings, they're ugly as hell, but it's that bizarre kind of ugly where you can look at it and find a *perverse* beauty, know what I mean? They look filthy, most of them. Not pure and clean like that." He spared another long look at *The White Veil*, then seemed to dismiss it with a shake

of his head. "I don't mean filthy in a pornographic sense. I mean the way metal looks before … I don't know … before it rolls through a Detroit factory and gets shaped and smoothed out and painted and waxed. Raw metal."

Her eyes narrowed as she tried to summon a composite of the feelings such paintings must evoke. Something about them conjured a cold and harsh sense of brutality. "What kind of imagery in them do you recall?"

"Oh … gears. Girders. Smokestacks. Twisted bridges that don't go anywhere. Piles of scrap iron." Clay bit into one corner of his mouth. "Graham calls them post-industrial landscapes. His studio and apartment, all those paintings around … he once called it the junkyard of the world."

"And this is a world of … what?" She was curious. Decay? Progress in rampant decline? Fill in the blank.

He thought for a moment. "A world of barriers. I mean, what's metal for, if not keeping things in their places?"

Adrienne recalled the condition of Clay's clothing the other night, when he had been brought in. The boots caked with dust, both inside and out, the dusty jeans and jacket and shirt. With mild dehydration and sunburn on top of it all. The obvious conclusion was that he was not long out of the open desert.

"That world reflected in Graham's paintings," said Adrienne, like the sliding of a gentle probe. "Is that the world you wanted to get away from for a while?"

He didn't answer, not for a minute, maybe more. One never realized how much time was compressed into one minute until hearing it tick away, waiting for a reply in a dead-silent room. She took care to watch his face for the emotions it betrayed, and clearly he was wrestling with those barely understood compulsions that drove him.

"I guess it was," he finally admitted, as if it were some sort of moral defeat. "But everybody needs that, sometimes, so I don't know how much you can read into it."

Enough, she thought. In this society the call of the wild was rarely answered in much less than a Winnebago. Or at least with a backpack and four-wheel drive. Clay's had been a much more primal response.

"This need must have been considerably stronger in you than in most people, wouldn't you say?"

"Probably." He shrugged, apparently unconcerned with pursuing a comparison. "I was on the road, hitching and walking, close to a week. The desert? I guess I came into Tempe about three days after I got off the road completely, but I didn't want to stay long, I still wanted to keep going." He wet his lips. "Do you know what it's like to walk for three days and not see asphalt?"

Adrienne shook her head. "No, I don't, really. Maybe you could fill me in."

Clay tilted his head back, gazing at the ceiling, through it. "Something gets stripped away. It's hard to say what it is, exactly, but it leaves you. And you're not sorry to see it go. The only things you hear are things that have already been making noise for a few million years. You regress … part of you hits this embryonic state. It's easier to pick yourself apart this way. To look inside and do some serious thinking. *That's* what it's like."

"If you went out there to do some soul-searching," she said, "were you able to walk away with any conclusions?"

"One big one, for sure: Jesus must have gotten really hungry after forty days."

Okay, she deserved that. She knew better than to ply him with such a direct question. One observation, though: Whatever the trip had represented to him, likely it had been a failure.

And his choice of mythic analogy was interesting, on second thought. Maybe she could work with this after all.

"Jesus went into the wilderness to confront — and ultimately overcome — a devil. In very loose terms, do you think it's possible you were doing the same thing?"

He rolled his eyes. "I don't have a messiah complex and I don't have delusions of grandeur."

Adrienne nodded, conceding. "But you do have a sense of the mythic. Friday morning? 'Clay Palmer … of the Gehenna Palmers'? You may have been joking, just as you said, and then again you may have been telling me in a very subtle way that your earlier family life was hell. Either way, the mythic element is there." The Jungian disciple in her, browsing the storehouse of the collective unconscious: those basic elements and symbols that resonated in humankind the world over, regardless of culture. "You

don't need a messiah complex or delusions of grandeur to relate to a story about a journey of confrontation and self-discovery. Or to go on one."

Eight hundred miles he'd come, but clearly he had been more concerned with seeking a goal, rather than running from something behind him.

"Was that what this trip was all about?" she asked. "Your own journey of self-discovery?"

Clay Palmer may have been a stranger, but as she watched him honestly try to wrestle with this one, she realized that some evasive shadow in both their souls was quite similar. How well she understood that mysterious lure of the desert, its siren song of hot gusts and desolate winds, chilly nights, and the harsh, unforgiving fact of its very existence. It had pulled her away from the city of her birth at a time when her entire life had been in flux.

And while she couldn't see it from her bedroom window, she at least knew it was there.

Her transition had been made, of course, via all the socially acceptable routes. New job, new house, new friends, and, if a bit less orthodox, a new love. Clay, however, had stripped away all such niceties until only an elemental core remained. And what was this inside her — an amusing twinge of jealousy over the purity in his method?

"Confront *this*, Adrienne," he finally said. "I don't fit into the world, and it took a long time, and it still isn't easy, but I finally started trying to accept that. Fine. But that doesn't mean I don't think somebody or something, somewhere, still owes me a damn good explanation."

Four

Days passed, bones began to knit…

And *itch*. In years gone by there had been summers in which he had lain naked and brooding on forest floors, or near the shores of lakes, and as he invariably would have forgotten mosquito repellent, they would come near to consuming him alive. They would leave him covered with a raw quilt of bites that he would scratch until blood welled and he was left almost mad with the screaming constancy of sensation.

The itch of skin, the itch of bone. Between the two, he preferred the former; the latter was agonizingly more than skin deep. Would that he had the ability to turn inside-out, or plunge a hand deep within, and scrape along every hidden channel that plagued him.

But he would get through it. No one could itch forever.

Of the pills prescribed to stabilize his expected mood swings, Clay wondered if they didn't work more by power of suggestion than by anything else. Perhaps he was just on a natural remission as far as *those* tendencies were concerned. There were no threats here; more than anything, he was surrounded by a routine that stultified by its blandness, boredom. But if slipping pills down his gullet in daily rations made them feel safe, fine. He knew better. If he had to kick, or bite, or swing those casts like weighty gauntlets, he knew he could, without hesitation.

And what would Dr. Adrienne Rand say then?

It would be a blow to her, all the time she'd put in on him thus far. Given past experience with the prior skull dabblers who had shown him to their couches, the burden of proof that she wasn't just going through more motions was definitely on her shoulders. And she had held up all right. He knew the difference by now. Familiarity had bred a general contempt for most of her ilk, but for now he was willing to grant that she had a genuine core of human interest. *"Help me, Adrienne,"* he could cry, like a child awakening in the night, and she would come running.

Not that she was free of self-indulgent curiosity. This too he could spot when she posed questions, or lit up with fascination at some minor

revelation he thought insignificant. She had an agenda as mercenary as it was irrelevant to him, but as long as she kept humanity in the foreground he would not begrudge her the rest.

"You'll win some shrink, somewhere, the research grant of a lifetime," Uncle Twitch had told him last year, mostly joking but not entirely, and it had been one of those rare occasions when Graham had actually laughed.

Right out of the psychoanalytical starting gate, Adrienne put him on twice-weekly sessions, Sundays and Wednesdays, and would periodically pop by for brief visits. Spot-checks?

As faces went, he supposed hers was the only one he looked forward to seeing in the hospital; the rest were drones and human dross. Adrienne Rand, though, brought with her this pinched look of interest, as if his room wasn't just one more stop along the hall. He appreciated that she never exuded patently false cheer. For what it was worth, perhaps she was of more inherent honor than most who wore the *Homo sapiens* designer tag.

She was tall, only an inch or so under his own five-nine, and with her blond hair pulled back, and the seriousness with which she took his case, it soon became entertaining sport to fantasize her into roles he doubted he would ever tell her about. He saw her in black Nazi leathers and crimson lipstick, a Goddess of Pain and Humiliation who ruled the halls of an unspeakable clinic unknown to the medical mainstream. She would carry a riding crop for effect, and an ominous black bag filled with painful instruments of exploration. A well-greased glove might slide down his throat as she sought to tear out his heart, or up his rectum in search of secrets dirtier still. It might very well be the only thing before which he would have to lie helpless…

Just idle thoughts. Everyone needed diversions while on the mend.

In truth, she gave him no encouragement that such fetishes were part of whatever twisted upbringing she would call her own, so he settled for satisfying her endless curiosity about his past.

He told stories, random synaptic firings with no apparent pattern, and he noticed that the more he remembered, the less Adrienne spoke. She did not have to; she was sucking it out of him with her eyes and her presence alone.

So here it is, Dr. Adrienne Rand. Surely you've heard whining tales of misfits before, but if it means that much to you:

Doesn't everybody have parents who go through life looking at each other as if they both have made a horribly wrong turn somewhere in the distant past, but cannot recall precisely where? Probably it *is* easier, in the day-to-day, to pretend it never happened than to do something about it. One can fall for years before striking bottom, and it doesn't take nearly the effort of one minute of climbing.

Doesn't everybody have a father who was nearly forty by the time he got around to siring offspring? A father who proudly fought with the Marines in Korea and let no one forget it, and who saw his firstborn as a prospective little soldier to be marched around and around within the house on peculiar drills? Three hours is forever when you're five. Left, right, left, right, and don't you dare cry, you little pussy, if you cry I'll smack you *and* your mother, and you'll watch. He learned to toe the line, and by the time he was old enough to understand the omnipresent television show called Vietnam, and listen to his father's armchair Pentagon rhetoric about everything that was being mishandled there, young Clay's big fear in life was that it would all end before he was old enough to ship over.

Doesn't every father hold his kid's hand over the gas-stove burner, an exercise in discipline?

Doesn't everybody have a mother whose eyes deaden with every increase in breast droop and hip expansion, and to whom vodka is a wretched god that gives and takes away? A mother who, too often, cries herself to sleep on a sagging couch and clutches her child to her heart and, with reeking breath, murmurs promises of tomorrow? We'll go away, for the rest of our lives, but remember, you can't tell Daddy, it's our own special secret.

Doesn't everybody have brothers and sisters who failed to survive? He was first, the eldest, therefore the strongest. His survival seemed perfectly natural at the time, as one crib death and then three miscarriages claimed all others who might be called siblings. He recollected his small, solitary celebrations with root beer and a hidden cache of firecrackers, because he had outlived yet another.

How insular, this world of childhood, when anything might be perceived as the norm.

"How old were you when your sister died?" Adrienne asked, a Wednesday afternoon in her office. He actually looked forward to the

sessions more and more. They were the two hours per week when he felt farthest from his itching bones.

"I was five," he said. "It's one of my first real memories. I can't say for sure, but something about that day had a real Sunday-afternoon feel to it. I think we'd been to church … and I remember a roast smell, all through the house. Beef roast, that was always Sunday food. Special. Family day, you know. All God's children love a good roast."

He looked at Adrienne in her chair, legs crossed at the knee, where her interlocked fingers rested. All she did was nod, but he knew her nods by now, could differentiate among them. *Yes,* she was saying, *go on, tell me more. Feed me.*

"I remember my mother, her voice at first, coming out of the nursery and down the hall. High, very high, and loud. Like she was trying to talk, but something was clipping frequencies from her voice, so it was just this … this *sound* … this creepy *sound*. Crying, but uglier, just … nonsensical. Like the sound of chaos, if chaos could grieve. I'd never heard anything like that before. It scared the hell out of me. I just stayed put on the dining room floor — I was playing with a toy truck — but even though I was scared, what I really wanted to do was run down the hall and see why she was making that noise. Because whatever it was, if I saw it and I *didn't* scream, I knew I'd see something I'd never seen before. I didn't know what … maybe like a god suddenly showed up in there or something. It was Sunday, remember."

"Was this the first time your parents were forced to explain death to you?"

Clay nodded. Memories were like dominoes, one tripping another tripping another, until all lay flat and inert. "My father sat me down on the back stoop with him that evening. The sun was going down. One of the neighbors was grilling steaks, must have been. That smell of meat again." He shook his head. "The backyard seemed bigger at twilight. It always scared me then, I thought it was changing on me. I couldn't trust it, it wasn't the same place I'd play during the day. I, umm … I guess I must have asked where they'd taken Amy. It was the only time I can remember seeing him cry. Actual tears on that leathery, pitted face — it seemed so *wrong*. He told me God sent some people to take Amy away, because He needed more angels." Clay laughed. "I think that was the extent of my father's theological

understanding. And if he thought he was giving me comfort, he couldn't have been more wrong. I sat there wondering, if it was that easy, what was to stop them from coming for *me* the next time?

"'At ease,' he told me. He actually said that, 'At ease.' And then he nodded and told me, just this once, it was okay to cry if I wanted to. I sat there and tried, but nothing happened, so I told him I'd save it for later. He put his arm around me and said he was proud of me for that."

"For staying strong, you mean."

"Not so much strong, as in control. Control, that was a very big issue for my father." He supposed it still was. He had neither seen nor spoken to nor corresponded with either parent since leaving Minnesota four years ago. His father would be sixty-four now; there was no reason to believe him dead. Men like that never died before living a full lifespan and more, inflicting their share of misery on the world. "Maybe that's what shook him up most about my sister's death. And my mother's round of miscarriages after that. It must have been her drinking that did those. She was probably so toxic inside, nothing could live for very long. He used to hit her but she wouldn't stop. Everything was way the hell out of his control. Maybe that's what first taught me that something *could* be out of his control. It was … liberating. So I became the miscarriage that lived."

It was his fourth session with Adrienne when that came out, and shouldn't he be feeling at least *some* relief from such confessions? One would think so. These rancid old memories, he'd not called them up for longer than he could remember. They were episodes in the life of a Clay Palmer he no longer recognized, a family that wasn't truly his. The most he felt during it all was some minor uneasiness now and then, never any real pain.

Quite the contrary: There could be *fun* in this, as if he were a boy, with a boy's usual fascination with morbidity, and he had found a bloated roadside carcass to prod and turn over, and whose distended cavities he might examine to see what squirmed inside.

There was no real pain linked with telling Adrienne of the child he had been, the slings and arrows withstood. Doesn't everybody know small boys, late to grow, last to be chosen, first to be punched and spat upon when childhood begins its rites of stratification? Some boys simply grow up magnets for fists and spittle, some subtle thing indefinably strange about

them. Such tormented boys radiate their otherness from every pore and cell, a phenomenon everyone recognizes but none can qualify. It might as well be debated why the sun rises in the east.

Yet why such variance in their adult selves, when all have been much the same victims? Some grow stunted, some straight and true, while others grow like lone pine trees on the sides of barren mountains, twisted by winds into ghastly shapes that are freaks of nature, one of a kind, fundamentally abhorrent.

Were these the boys who learned to bite in self-defense? Who smiled, bully-blood on their lips and chins, at bigger boys who for the first time knew pain and tears and their own high-pitched shrieks? Were these the boys who, no longer tormented, were shunned instead, abandoned to sit alone on green playgrounds with their sack lunch or a book or their own thoughts, the object of sullen loathing and — *admit it* — fear?

In his experience, in his humble estimation, they were.

For doesn't everybody stumble across their own survival mechanisms deep within, as if inscribed upon tablets that cannot be read, yet are nevertheless comprehensible? The most ancient languages are learned by instinct.

This was his world, the one into which he had been born, the world that had penned its inarguable natural laws upon his heart, then demanded obedience or death.

How odd, then, that his fellow citizens had passed so many laws against what seemed to come most naturally.

But maybe it was him, all him, all wrong. At times he fretted about his heredity, some hideous genetic mistake inside, as had once been attributed to mass-murderer Richard Speck. Adrienne told him he need not worry, such claims had been mostly sensationalism. It was more vital that he focus on what he could control, could understand.

And it came about fifty minutes into this, his fourth session in her office. Two full minutes of silence passed before he fell back into his present self from the past, and realized his broken bones did not itch. They would later, surely they would, but for now it was like realizing there was an end to the routine that had so quietly engulfed him.

He would be discharged soon, would be on his way. Back to Denver, yes … but where?

This was solitude; this was the loneliness spoken of by hermits isolated within crowds. This was the desolation that old Eskimos must feel when sitting on the ice, abandoned by family and waiting to die.

Clay's breath began to come in spastic hitches; his throat constricted and felt suddenly raw. Worst of all was the scalding presence of tears before he even knew they were on their way. It was a low and brutish thing to do, but he could not stop himself. His body, loathsome thing that it was, was betraying him for reasons of its own. He was clueless, and spilling forth from within.

"Shit. I don't — don't understand this," he choked out. How grotesque his voice was.

Adrienne was there for him, as much as she could be, leaning forward to press a tissue to his fingertips. He looked at it for a moment before letting it flutter to the floor. If he was going to cry, then let it soak him.

His sudden perspective on the office was that of a vandal. So much to break, so much to shatter into fragments that would cascade with enough noise to drown out tears. What release destruction could bring. He felt the urge resonate in bone and fiber, nerve and cell. It crawled within his arms, trembled within his legs; it wrapped around his heart and sang inside his blood.

He clenched shut his eyes, wrapped himself with both arms, until it passed as surely as a seizure.

He looked at Adrienne and realized she knew. She read it all in his face and her fleeting wisp of fear was as palpable as a scent. She had placed her faith in lithium and it had failed her, whereas his resolve had triumphed…

If only this once.

"Help me," he whispered.

And this, too, might happen but once.

Five

By sunset, everyone at the party had finished eating and now tended to amiably drift from one conversation to another. Adrienne found herself at the edge of the rear deck with Sarah, seated, content to watch the multihued glory of the melting sun. The back of Jayne and Sandra's house had a western exposure that opened onto a desert panorama, an ascetic flatland where spilled the day's blood, rich and rubied.

It was the kind of house, kind of location, that she would have preferred, had Sarah not hungered to remain closer to the heart of Tempe and the campus. She could look at this sight every evening, never tiring of it, for it would never be the same twice. This realization pricked her heart with a tiny stab of loss: How many sunsets had she missed already in her life that she could never retrieve?

Sarah propped her feet on the wooden railing; from her lap she took a bowl of apple slices soaking in a splash of white wine, and placed it in Adrienne's lap. "Be my wench. Feed me," Sarah said with a grin, then tipped her head back, opened her mouth expectantly.

"You look like a baby wren," Adrienne said and played along. One cool, crisp slice after another, dripping with wine — she set each on Sarah's tongue and watched them slide past her lips. Drops of wine plinked soft as new rain and began to trickle down Sarah's cheeks. Adrienne leaned in with flickering tongue to kiss them away.

"Are we creating a spectacle?" Sarah asked.

Adrienne looked over her shoulder to the house and sliding glass doors, open now, looked at the small milling groups. No one was paying attention. "Yes," she said anyway.

Sarah half-groaned, half-laughed. "Good." She returned the kiss with sticky, sweetened lips. "I knew I could turn you into an exhibitionist if I had enough time."

Years before, when married, Adrienne would watch women who put on such public displays with men, and was usually tempted to suspect them of ulterior motives. Showing off, or using one man's attentions to attract

another; something about them seemed terribly self-conscious, like exhibitions of plumage or twitching haunches during mating season.

Now she was willing to accept that such things had been done, at least some of the time, simply for the carnal joy of it, and that she had been jealous of others' freedom to do something in full public view that she herself would never have done. Sarah had been more instrumental than anyone in changing her mind, just by being Sarah. She got like this whenever and wherever the mood struck; in private or not, it never mattered.

They had met after Adrienne had been in Tempe for half a year, and had sat next to each other at an evening guest lecture at the university. Nothing short of broken legs would have kept Adrienne away. The speaker was once a student and protégé of Erich Fromm. Adrienne adored Fromm, whose theoretical stances on social psychology, along with the more mythically oriented stances of Carl Jung, had driven stakes into the heart of much of what she found lacking or simplistic in Freud. Jung and Fromm comprised the two mighty pillars on which she had built her own outlook.

Adrienne had arrived as early as she could and sat third row center in the lecture hall. Two seats over sat a woman who doodled in a notebook and, minutes later, kicked off both shoes and propped her dirty bare feet upon the back of the seat before her. Adrienne could not decide if she was rude or just ill-bred.

And what wide, strong feet they were, too. Adrienne couldn't help but stare, fascinated by the sturdy bone structure, the power in the high arch, the light tracery of veins, then the sudden thought of every place they must have carried this woman throughout her life. She was possessed of an abrupt desire to touch them, stroke them. The woman caught her staring, and Adrienne tried to look away, but too little, too late.

"At my day job," said the dark-haired woman, leaning in, very deadpan, "I tread on grapes."

"Oh." Adrienne was brought up horribly short, never before at such a loss for words. Shouldn't she say *something*, at least? "I shrink heads."

She'd blurted it out before she realized it, and red could not even *begin* to describe the color blooming across her cheeks.

The woman smiled, wide and delighted; Adrienne next caught herself staring at her full lower lip, as moist and ripe as some enticing fruit.

"A genuine modern primitive," the woman said, reaching out to shake Adrienne's hand. "I never would have guessed."

The lecture ended as, if not a total loss for Adrienne, then near enough, an hour and forty minutes of concentration shattered. The amplified voice wafted past her like a breeze she was only fitfully aware of, while instead consumed by every aspect of the woman she was to later know as Sarah Lynn McGuire. The sound of her breathing, the etching of her pen across page after page of notebook paper. No movement, from a shift in her chair to a sweeping of hair from her eyes, was too minute to escape notice. Adrienne felt progressively warmer throughout this exercise in torture, bathed in an imagined cloud of pheromones, while the object of a desire she'd not even realized she had was less than three tantalizing feet away.

Now *this* was going to take some introspection.

She had long acknowledged herself to be bisexual, if latent these days. It had been years since she'd had any kind of sexual relationship with another woman, and even those had been fleeting, sandwiched between lengthier affairs with boyfriends. First had come a handful of tentative high school encounters, more confusing than anything, wherein offbeat flirtation had led to hesitant kisses and experimental touches in the cars or bedrooms of friends, after which she would retreat to the solitude of her own room in the middle class fortress of her parents' home, and sit without moving, aware of the fearful throb between her legs, as insistent as an accusation. It never quite felt wrong enough to frighten her away from a next time.

With college came greater assurance, and the consummation of what had previously been mere sex-play. She possessed her own life there, as did the women she occasionally met who wanted to be more than friends, and they had all the time needed to explore. It was no longer experimentation, this she recognized right away. The light touch of a nipple beneath her fingertips, the grinding undulation of a gently swelling belly against her own, the musky taste of petaled labia and budlike clitoris upon her tongue … she took to these as naturally as she had taken to men and their rougher, more singularly directed passions. Neither seemed to possess a clear advantage over the other. She was either neatly divided into halves, or, conversely, unified into a perfect whole. Omnisexual? It had an intriguing connotation.

Still, there had been no one of like gender in her life since graduate school, and she had come to think of her lack of sexual differentiation in lovers as a phase she'd outgrown. In eighteen months of preliminaries and seven years of marriage, Neal had never even realized she was bi. Although after his philandering and their divorce, she'd thought of sending him a card — *Guess what, I like pussy too* — but it seemed a childish and spiteful thing to do.

Not to mention no longer applicable.

Or so she had believed, apparently erroneously. Her reinvention of self in Tempe had apparently brought the past. Adrienne credited the desert, naturally. Those winds and infrequent rains, no telling what buried treasures might wink anew in the dawning sun after a night's erosion.

What greater proof did she need? For there she was, trapped in a lecture hall with her sweat and her hunger and a stranger. Going on thirty-two years old and her heart pounding as if fifteen, while she had no way of knowing if the woman seated within her reach shared even a remotely similar orientation.

Fortunately, Sarah had taken pity on her, had made the first overture. Perhaps she smelled the frightful conflict that must have exuded from Adrienne's every pore and left her terrified to initiate further talk — but not too paralyzed to accept Sarah's invitation to go to The Coffee Plantation for lattes.

And within a week Adrienne had reaffirmed for herself that which archaeologists have always known: buried treasures are far more beautiful and valued the second lifetime in which they see the sun.

*

The apple slices were gone and Sarah had drunk the wine from the bowl by the time the sun was down, nothing but a defiant rose-red rime thinned across the horizon. The party was coasting, mellow, and Adrienne wondered if they would ever get around to singing "Happy Birthday" to Jayne.

"Remember the code blue I told you about, from a couple of weeks ago?" Adrienne asked.

"How could I forget a wandering desert madman?" Sarah ran a finger in the bowl and licked the traces of wine from the tip. "Such a classic, and it had to be you. You had to remind me, didn't you?"

Adrienne frowned. "You wouldn't have been feeling privileged if you'd seen him brought in. It would've almost made you sick. He'd beaten his hands to splinters, don't forget."

"Sorry." Sarah's face of contrition. "It was just so vivid, you know?"

"I know, I know. There *is* something about it, isn't there? But there's something about *him*…" Adrienne sighed and waved her hand in frustration. "On one level I'm completely baffled by this guy. He doesn't act quite as he should."

She was breaching all manner of ethical considerations in discussing Clay Palmer. Still, there wasn't a doctor or nurse she knew who adhered to expectations of patient confidentiality to the letter of the unwritten law. They all blabbed when they got home, and rationalized it by citing their discretion: What's a little sacrifice of confidentiality between bedmates?

"He sounded pretty distraught to me," Sarah said. "How's he supposed to act?"

"Anybody who's that problematic with aggression is going to resist counseling to some degree, if not exhibit outright hostility. I've never treated anybody like that who was very cooperative. Never."

"And he's not fitting that pattern?"

"No. He's not. But he should. His background is textbook. I had him pegged as growing up in an authoritarian home, and I couldn't have been more right. The poor kid's father was an ex-Marine, and used to make him run drills when he was five and six. When he had a paper route, the father wouldn't even break down and take over for him when he was sick — he'd *follow* him to make sure he still did the job, but he wouldn't help. That was the father's way of instilling a sense of responsibility."

Sarah's face soured. "Sounds like a real bastard."

Adrienne nodded. "It goes on and on like that. A lot of the patterns are the same from case to case, but it never seems to screw up any two people in the exact same way."

"But this one's different even beyond the variations?"

"I think so. It's odd — in spite of all my expectations to the contrary, he's been surprisingly cooperative. That's not to say he made it easy all along. He started out digging at me with a few barbs. Our first session he suckered me into one of the more cleverly segued propositions I've gotten."

She caught a tiny pinching between Sarah's eyebrows; perhaps she shouldn't have mentioned that. She had overlooked the subtle associations that might trigger in Sarah, the kind of thing she was usually sensitive enough to avoid. While Adrienne was as happy with her as she'd ever been with anyone, she knew that Sarah held deep worries that could not be easily soothed, for they were not entirely groundless. While everyone worries to some degree about their mate leaving them for someone else, here it was compounded by Adrienne's ability to vacillate between either sex. This Sarah could not do, and while she hid her anxieties well, still Adrienne understood that she held a clear advantage. Should she decide to return to a more traditional relationship someday, there was little Sarah could do to fight it. There were times this lay between them like a silent threat, barely acknowledged but biding its time.

Adrienne stroked the backs of her fingers along Sarah's leg and went on. "All along, I felt he really wanted my help but would be too proud or too threatened to admit it, even if he didn't have to come right out and say so. But he proved me wrong there, too. 'Help me.' Those were his exact words."

As she drew in closer to Sarah's side, she remembered the apprehension that washed over her just before those words had left Clay's lips. She had watched him going through his emotional contortions, and there had surfaced within him a killing rage that thickened the air in the office. Every muscle had tensed and every doubt had surfaced: She had been wrong to trust him, been wrong to believe Ferris Mendenhall competent to prescribe an adequate dosage of lithium. She saw the wreckage that Clay could make of her office, and her. She saw her own obituary.

And as his seizure passed, there had swept through her an exhilaration she'd thought must surely be reserved for daredevil feats. Skydiving, ski jumping … anything where survival was left to fate.

This, more than anything, had taught her the addict's rush.

"There's something I'm not seeing yet in this guy," Adrienne murmured. "There's something in him that I'm missing."

"Then you'd better find it before long. You won't have all the time in the world with him."

"Tell me about it."

It was her one great fear in this case: Soon, word would come down to her that Clay Palmer was well enough to be discharged. He need not sit

around until his hands healed and the casts were removed. While obligated to provide a certain measure of care, the hospital would fund the costs of a transient assault victim for only so long without squawking and demanding his release. He had insurance, a group employee policy, but the claim was being contested because, in leaving Denver, he had walked away from his job.

Of course, she had a certain measure of control, as well. His physical evaluation was out of her hands, but his psychological well-being *was* her responsibility. As long as she said he wasn't ready to be released, that might be enough to keep him around.

"What I'm most worried about," said Adrienne, "is if he decides he wants to go back home. There's no way I can justify any follow-up then."

"Have you thought about…?" said Sarah, almost teasing, dangling a possibility like tantalizing bait.

"What?" Adrienne met her eyes. "Come on, what?"

"Now think." Sarah nestled in closer as a chilled breeze began to blow in off the darkening desert. Adrienne curled one arm up around her shoulders and slowly ran her splayed hand through Sarah's tousled mane.

"Ow," Sarah said. "Your fingers are sticky and you're pulling my hair."

"Good." A cruel smile played over Adrienne's lips and she drummed her wine-tacked fingers. "What are you getting at?"

Sarah twisted her head around until she could bite Adrienne's hand, bearing down lightly with a grin until the hand relented.

"Don't tell me I haven't caught a little jealous pining in your eyes whenever the subject of my thesis comes up."

Adrienne pinched Sarah's nose. "If you'd decided on a subject, you mean."

"You know what I'm talking about. You love independent research, and the fact that it's going to consume my life before long digs at you, doesn't it?" She demonstrated by gouging her fingers into Adrienne's ribs, her most ticklish spot. "Right?"

"So what if it does? You're a presumptuous little bitch, you know that?" As she was running out of bodily places to torment, name-calling seemed a viable alternative.

Sarah grabbed both of Adrienne's hands and held them tight. "Then do something about it. What, the great healing motivator in my life can't see

the obvious? If you're that intrigued by what makes him tick, run an end sweep around the hospital, go to the university psych department, and put in for some grant money so you can treat him as your first research subject."

"And what makes you think I haven't already moved in that direction?"

Sarah flashed her sweetest smile. "Because if you had, you wouldn't have been so insufferably mopey about him five minutes ago. You would've been bursting." She arched her eyebrows, smug and satisfied, and leaned in nose-to-nose. "Right?"

"Right," Adrienne confessed.

She stretched out her legs to prop her feet on the railing beside Sarah's, and together they watched the darkness thicken across the desert, waiting for someone to come and tell them how antisocial they were being. It *was* a birthday, after all.

Six

Her weekend passed too slowly after that, her Sunday shift crawling except for the hour-long session with Clay, their fifth. She was a victim of her own growing obsessions, and they murdered time while leaving its bloated corpse in her way.

Monday morning she went back in on her own time and flagged down an impromptu meeting with Ferris Mendenhall. The man himself was easy enough to work under, but she had always hated his office. Bare of wall and devoid of personality, it always gave her the impression of having just been moved into, or about to be vacated, with the decor boxed away. She wondered what it meant, if Mendenhall had never felt himself long for this office, this position.

"I'm trying to be as ethical as I know how," Adrienne said, "and not bypass hospital hierarchy."

From across his desk, for the most part clean as a windswept plateau, Ferris Mendenhall eyed her. He was a lean man in his mid-forties whose white coat tended to flap upon his frame like a clipper's sail, and had no upper lip that she had ever seen. It remained hidden behind a drooping moustache that curled down with lazy bravado, a relic of a bygone age. If the sunburned pate visible through his thinning hair had been covered by a cavalry officer's hat, he might well have been dashing.

"*This* should be interesting," he said.

"How long would you estimate that Clay Palmer might be here before you start getting some real pressure to discharge him?"

"Clay Palmer…" Mendenhall leaned back in his chair and steepled his fingers. "This would be the patient with the broken hands?"

"Yes."

"Given that he came in under dual admission, so to speak, I'd say at least a few weeks." He frowned with his deep-set eyes; it looked perilously close to bureaucratic scrutiny. "Why?"

Adrienne took a deep breath. "I'd like your support with something as regards his case. Let me preface this by stating that he needs more help than

he's likely to get here, unless somebody takes extra initiative. He's from Denver, and twice he was committed there for observation and, I assume, some rudimentary treatment" — this she realized she had said with disdain — "and it certainly didn't come close to meeting his needs. He needs more intensive therapy than he's had an opportunity to get."

Mendenhall rolled his chair back up to the desk. "This is not a county hospital for charity cases, and his insurance matter hasn't been resolved yet, although it doesn't look like the policy carrier has much ground to stand on. Still, if he needs months or years of therapy, refer him to County Services, where someone can deal with him on an outpatient basis."

"That's not good enough," she said, and shook her head. "For a couple of reasons. First, he isn't *from* here. If he were discharged, he'd have no place to stay. And even if he did, his dexterity's so limited by those casts that, he is, for most practical purposes, helpless. Which means he'd have no choice but to return to Denver, and honestly, I don't think he can even afford a bus ticket."

Mendenhall fiddled with his moustache, a sad Monday-morning look about him. "And reason number two?"

"*I'm* making progress with him. In our midweek session last Wednesday, he made a specific request that I help him. Send him elsewhere, and not only is he forced to start over with someone new, but the trust that I've established with him is completely shattered. Which can't help but impact the way he views the next therapist who tries to work with him." Adrienne scooted to the edge of her chair. "Ferris, it's my most sincere recommendation that discharging him anytime soon would be disastrous. Take one look through his file, and factor in what brought him here the night he was admitted, and you'll see that his violent outbursts have been getting worse over time. He's stabilized now, but he's still in a very precarious state of mind."

Mendenhall swiveled in his chair and stared for a moment at a file cabinet across the room. Upon it sat an iron casting of a Remington sculpture, horse and rider frozen in a moment of pure, perfect panic as, below, a rattlesnake hung poised in defiance. A curved symmetry rippled through the horse; it could either soar or collapse.

He swiveled back to her. "Unless his insurance carrier gets more cooperative, the administration will never allow him to stay here for any

protracted length of time, and they are *not* swayed by arguments such as this, Adrienne."

She knew this, of course. Administrative logic was cold and precise and devoid of heart. There was compliance with the Hippocratic oath, yes, and they could not have turned Clay away at the door. Moreover, though, there was a bottom line. Too often the two pursuits were incompatible.

Nor was she entirely above it. Why else was she here, rather than at County? Every fourteen days she cashed her check from here and not once thought it too high a reward.

"I'm not asking for an indefinite stay," she said. "Before long, I may be able to work out a solution where Clay Palmer can be discharged and I can continue to treat him."

One of Mendenhall's eyebrows creaked upward. "And this would come about…?"

"You might as well know it now" — she paused, with a curt nod — "I recently applied for an independent grant to study male aggression." Talking herself in deeper by the minute. Certainly she was committed *now* to taking action over the next day or two.

Mendenhall's face seemed to glaze with incredulity, each pore constricted, each hair a stiffened bristle. "You will *not* bring your personal agendas to this ward, and expect to be automatically accommodated."

"I don't see anything here as being mutually exclusive. While my first priority is the welfare of my patient, I'm not going to sit here and tell you that, in a case like this, I have no auxiliary interest in it at all." Adrienne leaned forward and relinquished Clay's file onto Mendenhall's desk, pecked it with a fingernail. "Just go through his file and see if you can find fault with a single thing I've said."

"I'll do that."

The skirmish was hers. Now, to press the advantage. And hope it was not too much, too soon.

"I'd like your permission for a simple test on Clay that may seem a bit out of the ordinary. I'd like to have his genetic karyotype run."

Mendenhall looked as if he had bitten into something sour. "What *possible* use could you have for that?"

"Specifically, to check him for a double-Y genotype."

Mendenhall began to laugh, short hitches of breath that rippled his moustache. "There's never been any conclusive correlation between a double-Y and aggressive behavior."

"I'm aware of that. But it's not been disproved, either."

Double-Y's possessed an extra male chromosome, an anomaly whose 1961 discovery had led to its carriers being regarded as "supermales." Subsequent studies caused a sensationalized fear of genetically predisposed criminals, but this was largely the result of sloppy research methodology: Subjects in influential studies in Great Britain and Sweden had been culled from mental institutions and prisons, rather than from the general population.

Mendenhall grabbed the file and shuffled to general patient data, scanned it quickly. "No indication of subnormal intelligence — hmm, to the contrary. Height only average." He closed the file and met her with quizzical eyes. "How could you possibly suspect he's a double-Y?"

"I don't," Adrienne said. "He does."

Mendenhall groaned and rubbed his crinkling forehead. "And he got this idea from where? Movies, or TV?"

Adrienne shook her head. "Neither. Clay has a collection of books about serial murders and criminal abnormality. He first read about the double-Y in connection with Richard Speck — "

"Amateur speculation. Speck didn't even have a double-Y."

"Well, I gather most of the books Clay has, if not all, are more sensationalistic than scholarly in nature. But to be fair, I even looked it up in one of my old academic texts, and it was in error, too."

"Is he fixated on this?"

Adrienne nodded. "To an extent. He mentioned it in our third session and didn't much dwell on it, and once I'd explained that he shouldn't consider himself a candidate for it — because of his intelligence and height — I didn't think it was significant. But he brought it up again yesterday."

She silently cursed all scientists and exploiters everywhere who, with half-baked brains, trumpeted baseless conclusions that served only to inspire panic, like ripples across a calm pond. She no longer paid attention to the latest findings of dietitians who announced new reasons to scorn old foods. They would undoubtedly be contradicted soon enough, and hopefully go to their graves someday with all the obscurity they deserved.

How much more fundamental, if less widespread, was the fear generated by those who attached stigmas to abnormal variations of body and mind? Such deviations were so deeply borne that, to those affected by them, it was like giving them cause to loathe their own bodies.

"I think if we have his karyotype run and supply him with picture-perfect proof that he's not a double-Y," said Adrienne, "it'll help alleviate the anxiety he's feeling over it. And free him up for the things that do matter."

Mendenhall sat with pursed lips and frowning eyes, while the desktop held his gaze. "What kind of expenditure would this be?"

Always the cost; alleviation of misery was next in line. "If you want a dollar figure, I can't say. But negligible. It's a very routine, simple screen. We can't do it on the premises but we *can* keep it local: the Genetics Center of Arizona Associated Labs."

He progressed from pursed lips to gnawing at the inside of one corner of his mouth. "Find out how much. I can't give you the authorization until I know."

Adrienne smiled, a thin, shrewd, dealmaker's smile that just managed to conceal her irritation that he did not wholly trust her word.

"Thank you, Ferris," she said, and knew just when to leave.

*

The psycho ward didn’t allow televisions in the rooms — this was a surprise? On or off, TVs were notorious for implanting thoughts into heads. Clay had conversed with few of his ward mates, but enough to conclude that as far as most were concerned, denying them unlimited video access was wise. There was a large set in the dayroom, but it usually remained under the control of the staff, and whoever feared its influence — the home of the cathode-ray gods, perhaps — did not have to come near it.

Clay, however, soaked it up whenever he was able.

A tie to home; whenever he was home the TV was always on, although he didn't know why. It commanded attention, if not respect. He viewed it not as entertainment, but as a conduit of information. He could wire in with optic and auditory nerves; pipe in news and documentaries, commentary both rational and apocalyptic. He could define the state of the world in any given half hour, and it was always maddened.

Fringe shows on syndication and cable access were best, the gleam on the cutting edge of media psychosis.

It took him a week of attempts, whenever TV security was lax, to locate *The Eye of Vigilance*, coming out of a Phoenix station. It had a late-night time slot in Denver, but early-evening here. Curious. Perhaps in Arizona it met with a wider receptive audience.

Clay's rational side found that mildly scary, while the deconstructionist rejoiced — one more sign of Armageddon.

The Eye of Vigilance was the half-hour province of one Milton Wheeler, who lorded over his airwaves from behind a polished oak desk, and whose introductory fanfare announced to sycophants and heretics that he was "appointed by God as the conscience of the nation." No one knew if he really believed this or not, but it never hurts to call in the big guns.

There was much that made him rabid, and this stocky fellow with wagging jowls and manicured hands and his glasses slightly askew railed against it all with varying degrees of eloquence, sometimes with guests at his side, sometimes taking phone calls, and he was absolutely full of shit. This was, for Clay, the main attraction. Milton Wheeler was an idol in the making and could not lose. If he lived, the far right would eventually canonize him. If he were killed, then he would be its martyr.

Though for all Wheeler's propagandizing, Clay found that every now and again he did make an eerie kind of sense.

Monday evening, mid-October, an epiphany:

"A stranger is just an enemy you haven't assessed yet," he said, and the studio audience murmured its agreement.

"Did you hear that?" It was the patient in the chair beside Clay, forty years of twitches mellowing under medication. She always held two fingers as if they clamped a cigarette.

"Yeah," said Clay.

"Do you believe that?"

"I think so. Don't you?"

She pointed at the TV with her two fingers that never did anything alone. "That fat little man wants to be Jesus. Only he's too heavy, he'd tear loose and fall off the cross. That's why he's so pissed off all the time."

Clay cocked his head, staring at the screen, considering this. He half-shrugged, half-nodded. It was as good an explanation as any for what

motivated the man. "But they make better nails now."

"Well, somebody needs to go tell him, then." She brought her fingers to her lips and, with no cigarette to puff, scratched her chin. "Are *you* busy now?"

"I'm waiting," he told her, inspired by the unlikely wisdom of Milton Wheeler and this woman's messianic imagery, "for a table to be prepared for me in the presence of my enemies."

"Oh," she said. "Okay."

Clay watched until a nurse came along and noticed what was playing and switched to something less volatile, so he returned to his room and endured sundown — hated cusp of transition and advent of shadowed menace. The world stopped at the window, but the barrier was only glass and metal. Everything had a melting point.

A stranger is just an enemy you haven't assessed yet.

He had learned this lesson early in life, had merely failed to qualify it so succinctly. And fathers and mothers are never so honest as to prepare their malignant offspring for the social abortion the world is sure to perform on them.

But, inquisitive Adrienne, doesn't everybody wake up one day to realize his childhood was never the norm? Statistically speaking, neither mean, median, nor mode.

Doesn't everybody blame himself for failure to fit in, by deed if not conscious admission, and self-inflict the punishment due? A razor blade makes fine slices on arms and legs and torso, but a penknife is even better, thicker of blade and duller by increments; the skin resists its pressure before giving way, and the sensation is so much more real. And blood makes splendid ink with which to write indictments against oneself.

Doesn't everybody get together to compare scars for severity, frequency, aesthetics?

Doesn't everybody?

Of course not. Only the survivors.

He learned early in adolescence that life was nothing if not full of dichotomies. High school stank of contradictions, and what is high school but a model of the greater world? Even in rebellion there is conformity, while even among outcasts one can find refuge.

He and his friends of that era banded together mostly by default. The despised and the rejected, the hated and the brutalized, they auditioned one another with bravado or indifference or threats, almost by instinct, and found kindred souls in their solitude. Athletes and scholars, socialites and thespians … they were none of these, looking upon those who were with scorn. In time Clay realized they did so mainly because, as deviants who felt too much or too little or looked wrong, they had no choice. They resented what they could never be, what they would never be allowed to be. *I rejected you first,* they seemed to scream inside, and most fooled themselves into believing it was true.

Clay learned to appreciate the irony: Even among their small, pitiful ranks he did not wholly belong.

For he alone recognized the fundamental truth that people seem to function best when they have someone to hate. Nothing else stirs blood so energetically, or heats such emotion. Nothing else motivates with such ferocity. Nothing else flickers so brightly in dying eyes.

Crusades had been launched and wars declared, lands besieged and races exterminated, because someone had refined their hatred of the different, of the *other*, into something they could wield as effectively as a weapon. It was progress.

And there were times when Clay wondered, if there really was a God, if He hadn't created the world because He'd already known He would hate it.

These things the teenage Clay understood, day by day, year by year. Every fresh scar carved upon his body, and drop of blood spilled, and each tear that squeezed free of his eye, just seemed to confirm it.

Tears…? Even these. A world ignored may react with indifference, but a world hated seeks its own revenge.

A stranger is just an enemy you haven't assessed yet.

With the sun fallen beyond window and horizon, Clay moved across the room to stare out into the night. The ceiling light still burned, and the glass just beyond the chain mesh became a ghostly mirror that floated against the black. There hung his face and shoulders, little more than outlines; a faint glimmer of each eye, the suggestion of his mouth, his nose; the rest obscured.

There, against the night: a stranger to himself, a living portrait of the enemy within.

Seven

Adrienne proved to Mendenhall's satisfaction that a simple genetic karyotype would break no hospital bank account, even if insurance balked, and she was given clearance to have it run.

That Wednesday afternoon she came in early, escorted Clay down to the lab where a tech sampled his essences: a few hairs plucked from his scalp, and, to be thorough, a bit of blood drawn from his arm. Quiet and still, she gazed down as he submitted to the needle, watched it pierce skin, watched the vial fill with ruby brilliance. On his bared arm were the ghosts of old scars, five or six, white, emphatic like accent marks in a private language.

"Today's the thirteenth," he said, "isn't it?"

"Right." She found it fairly remarkable the way he kept track without a calendar.

"Maybe that's a bad omen." Clay frowned as the lab tech pressed a cotton ball over the violated vein.

"You never seemed superstitious before."

He raised his arm for a minute, as instructed by the tech. "And maybe I'm not serious."

Sometimes, she had to admit, it was not easy to tell.

The samples were packaged and sent across town by courier, to Arizona Associated Laboratories' bio-med division, on University. It was out of her league, but a fascinating procedure nonetheless. As she understood, it involved taking a cellular sample — a hair follicle, say, or plasma — and chemically treating it to suspend the movement of the chromosomes in cells undergoing division at that moment. The cells were then squashed and smeared across a glass microscope slide and stained to improve visibility. The inventory of chromosomes in a single cell's nucleus was then photographed through the microscope, after which each chromosomal image was cut from the print, sorted according to size and structure, matched into corresponding pairs, then pasted into a composite photo.

Any gross abnormality such as an extra Y sex-chromosome could not escape detection. The karyotype was a living diagram.

They would wait, they would see, and she would prove his fears groundless.

Later that afternoon, his session, on schedule: October sun slanting through the window, and the insistent whisper of the tape recorder, tiny cassette reels spinning to immortalize Clay's silence from the couch.

Eventually: "You were looking at the scars, weren't you?" He wore the long engulfing sleeves of a robe but proffered both arms anyway. "I noticed that."

"Yes. They caught my eye."

"What did you think of them?"

"I don't know as I thought anything about *them*, per se." Which was a lie, a little professional white lie; allowable, even expected. She had continued to see those pale, thin remnants of past slashes long after his sleeve had gone back down, wondering how they would feel beneath her fingers. There was nothing sexual about it; just the imagined tactility of hardened ridges. If there were enough of them, intersecting, they might feel like a chaotic web in which he chose to protect himself.

"Scars are benign, of themselves," she went on. "Where you're concerned, what interests me is the story behind them. The events and emotions that put them there."

"We've been over that before."

Nodding toward him, very slightly, with upraised eyebrows. Body language, when the words themselves might have been too harsh: *You brought it up.* He appeared almost sheepish.

"Twinkle, twinkle, little scar," Clay said. "You hadn't seen any of them before. I just wondered." Biting his lip then. While he usually seemed to resent it when she left him to stew in his own silence, he was handling it better with every session. "It was sport, I told you that, I think. Didn't I? Sometimes it was just endurance. Sometimes it was a rehearsal for something worse that I never ended up doing to myself."

"Suicide, you mean."

"I thought about it a lot."

"But not anymore."

He sat back against the couch. "It's been a few years." Contemplation, like shuffling through a photo album with nothing but grim black-and-whites: crime scenes and accident victims; his young life. "Maybe it just

didn't seem romantic anymore. You can get jaded about anything." This struck him as amusing. "Self-destruction can get kind of old and pretentious if you keep after it long enough. If you don't eventually off yourself, you're just a poseur."

Adrienne found herself tracking down an intriguing line of thought that Clay would, naturally, be too blind to see about himself. "So you put down the knife one day and decided, *No more*."

"More or less."

"Yet you've received several scars since then."

Clay raised his head fractionally, wary — somewhat amused but tempered with something grimmer, as well, some spiny little paranoia. "So?"

Tightroping over the session once again, hoping instinct still served her well — that he was ready to be confronted with the obvious and could deal with it.

"So is it possible that you put away your knife, but turned the same task over to others … one of whom might be willing to do a more thorough job?"

Sun at her back and the soft, soft sound of the cassette. She was never more aware of it than at moments such as this, when words and eye contact and even the air in the room congealed.

"Death wish, huh?" Clay's grin was shy and menacing by turns, depending on the tilt of his exquisitely contoured head. Biting his lip as he watched her with narrowed eyes, as if one moment hating her for finding him out, congratulating her for it the next. "Did it ever occur to you that maybe I decided I liked feeling other people's skin give way under my hands instead of my own?"

A lie. No, not exactly, more a rationalization. A defensive barrier thrown up hurriedly, enough to block her but not sturdy enough to fool her. Clay would know that, wouldn't he?

"That sounds like something that would come from a predatory outlook. From what I've seen about you, what I know about you, and the incidents that have gotten you into trouble, you don't fit the predator mold."

He stared down toward his casts. After three weeks they had gotten dingy, the pristine white given way to a more lived-in look. "I guess," he said, and looked at her in surrender, even embarrassment, "I just overreact."

Gently, Adrienne nodded. She had been sitting with one knee draped over the other, leaning back, relaxed or trying to at least give that impression, but now she dropped both feet to the floor and slid forward, edge of the seat.

Oh, what she could learn from him, given the time and the freedom.

"Whether they realize it or not, people usually overreact because they're feeling threatened. And not always by anything so obvious as three gang-bangers trying to relieve them of the last of their cash."

While she left this with him, Adrienne combed mental files. Trying to call up those incidents in which Clay's impulses got the worst of him. The destruction — merely mindless, or cannily directed? — he could leave in his wake. Shattered glass doors in convenience store coolers; BMW pounded halfway to the scrapyard with a lead pipe; parking lot rammings of the cars of cocky drivers with more insurance than sense. Yes, there had been fights too, but were his incidents of vandalism sudden ventings of rage to keep him from harming others? Or unconsciously chosen symbols of a world he despised?

Clay shifted back and forth on the couch — all at once he just couldn't get comfortable there. So he left it, wandered across the room until he could sag against the windowsill and stare out at a world he'd not been part of for nearly three weeks.

"I thought about trying to become a Buddhist once," he said to the glass, to a world that would never hear him, "because they always seem so peaceful. That was very appealing, I thought it might help." He had begun to rhythmically strike his casts together, clunk clunk clunk, hammer and anvil, harder, louder — how must that feel vibrating through his knitting bones? Then he stopped. "But it's so passive, I just … I couldn't.

"But I did read this story that made so much sense. A story about Buddha. Someone came up to him, trying to figure out what it was about him that made him so wise, so in tune. They asked him, 'Are you a god?' He said, 'No.' Then they tried again, 'How about a saint, are you a saint?' Same thing, 'No.' Finally had to ask, 'Well, what are you, then?' And Buddha said, 'I am awake.'"

Adrienne smiled. It was a beautiful little fable and for a moment she thought how much Sarah would love it, its profound simplicity. But Clay

had not shared it in delight, and she watched as he knocked his head against the window, eyes shut, breath fogging the glass.

"You related to something in that story," she said.

"I woke up one day, or month, or year — who knows how long it took, these things never just come over you full-blown, it takes time. I mean, I know there's something seriously screwed up about me, too, but … I started seeing everything around me for what it was. And I realized it was all I could do to stand it, living in a world where everybody seems satisfied with so little. I'm not talking about material things, I mean their *lives*. Give them their little ruts and they're happy. Or maybe not, but they settle for it, because they don't know any other way out. And nobody encourages them to find it."

Adrienne dared not interrupt his flow, watching as he drew himself together, stood taller, squarer at the window.

"It's all just part of the grand mediocracy," he said.

"Mediocrity, you mean?"

Clay shook his head. "Mediocrity is a quality. Mediocracy is the process that perpetuates it." He must have noticed her vague uncertainty. "The word, I mean, I made it up."

She nodded, and liked the word a great deal.

He explained: "In a democracy, the people are in charge. Theoretically. In an autocracy, it's a despot. In a theocracy, the church rules. So, in a mediocracy…" He left it open, passing it to her.

"Society is ruled by that which is mediocre," she finished, feeling a click within, a reversal of roles. He had become the lecturer and she the pupil.

She had wanted to learn from him? Of course. She had just thought she would remain in charge the whole time, and in a small way hated to lose the moment when she saw him turn again, back to the window, to stare. Hated world, intolerable world, world that rejects and is rejected.

"I'm awake," he whispered, "but all it does is hurt."

*

She thought of ruts over the next couple of days. How easy to fall into them, how difficult to recognize them from inside. Was she living in one as of late?

She worked, she treated patients. She came home, she slept. Books, always there to be read, nonfiction mostly, biographies and psychology texts, the occasional mystery. Her parents had retired two years ago to Prince Edward Island and she faithfully wrote them every other week. Now and again, a drive into the desert to watch the dawn, and feel the warming embrace as the newborn sun scorched the purity of land, to remember why she had come down here. Anything else? No, not much of note.

And she had to admit that, were it not for Sarah, it might sound dreadfully sterile. Sarah was a live-in safeguard against things becoming too routine. Sarah who prodded, "See this? Let's go here," and, "Look, look who's playing, you're coming with me, aren't you?" Sarah never had to prod very hard. Adrienne *wanted* a social life, but the world was geared to those whose nights were free. It was her schedule — how the hell was she supposed to have a real social life when she didn't clock in until four in the afternoon?

Re-evaluation often came out of unlikely inspirations: this time a patient who had brought her back face-to-face with the reasons she had gone into psychology in the first place.

Ruts meant no new purpose, no fresh goals. And so, that night after work, following the session with Clay, she stayed up until four completing her initial letter of proposal for a possible grant to study male aggression. She had already been to the university psychology department to see what was available, found herself drawn to one involving correlations between violence and authoritarian backgrounds. Perfect.

Of course, with the pace of funding agencies, both state and federal, she stood almost no chance of getting approval in time to take advantage of Clay's presence in Tempe. He would be long gone, discharged. There was no reason to expect Ferris Mendenhall to approve his stay for that long, assuming Clay would even *want* to stay.

Still, it didn't mean that, were a grant approved, she might not be able to make later contact.

Without exaggeration, Clay Palmer was unlike any other patient she had ever treated. She'd had ample contact with sociopaths and schizophrenics, and with patients whose maladaptation to the world had turned them into dysfunctional wretches. In their company Clay would fit, but he was the first of them to speak so rationally as a theoretician.

The mediocracy. Would Friedrich Nietzsche have spoken similarly, in this day and age, had he found himself in the asylum at the age of twenty-five?

Note to herself: See if there was anything available on the treatment Nietzsche had been receiving at the end of his life. It had been, after all, during the dawn of the psychoanalytic method.

Now, if she could just get the results of the karyotype so they could put that behind them.

Adrienne had been expecting it to arrive without ceremony, by courier perhaps, finding it in with her mail some afternoon when reporting for her shift.

The last thing she had expected was the Friday phone call from Arizona Associated Labs, ten minutes after her arrival. The voice on the other end was bewildered and excited in the same breath.

The results were nothing Adrienne had heard of before.

Worse, they were nothing the caller had ever seen.

Eight

She tried to banish the word from her mind. Such an ugly word, rife with connotations unfair to a victim of biology's whims and nature's passion for variety. Still, the word lingered, applicable, technically correct.

Mutation.

No wonder she had detected such a thrill in the voice of the geneticist who had called with the news. He had been looking at something so unusual its implications weren't even understood.

That weekend, Adrienne spent every free moment poring over genetics texts to give her at least some working knowledge of the subject, conversational footing in a science where even most M.D.'s were lacking. She burned both midnight and noonday oil, barely needing sleep. Sarah did not resent this in and of itself, only that for once Adrienne refused to share that which was consuming her. Tough. Sarah miffed was only a temporary condition, and this business of chromosomal mutation was just a bit beyond the usual pale of lives gone astray.

The core of the human animal, Adrienne knew, was written out in a seemingly endless sequence of protein codes, three billion base pairs in all, linked into the twining dual strands of a double helix, one of nature's most elegant structures. Three billion links in the chain of DNA, an identical text found in the nucleus of nearly every cell in the body. She found mind-boggling the sheer numbers and the infinitesimal scale on which they existed. Scaled-up analogies were the only thing that helped her grasp the enormity of the miracle. One she found especially vivid: It was as if a rope with a diameter of two inches and a length of 32,000 miles was neatly arranged within an organic vessel the size of a domed stadium. Behold, a single nucleus.

The rope, however, was not of continuous length. Human DNA was apportioned among forty-six chromosomes, two of which, the X and the Y, determined gender, the remainder existing in twenty-two matched pairs. Every trait of structure and function and bearing that characterized one as a human being — as well as an individual among the world's billions — was

encoded in the 50- to 100,000 genes found along the chromosomes. Most of the time, when anything went wrong on a genetic level, what and where was a mystery, although the number of genes associated with specific diseases and defects was increasing all the time.

Of genetic disorders, she learned there were around 3500. Among those, a mere twelve were so obvious they could be sighted off a karyotype at a glance.

Among them were conditions such as Klinefelter's syndrome and Turner's syndrome and others afflicting normal gender designation. Too many X chromosomes, or not enough. Then there was the XYY male genotype that had provoked such hotly contested debate.

Down's syndrome was also among this dozen, whose mentally retarded and physically impaired progeny carried a third copy of chromosome twenty-one, instead of the normal pair.

Twelve abnormalities, all unique.

But then there was Clay Palmer, who exhibited a thirteenth not even in any book she consulted: a triple set of chromosome twelve.

This was most unexpected.

And very, very new.

"How does this manifest itself in my patient?" she had asked.

"That's the wrong question. It's premature," she was told by a geneticist named Ryker. "Inasmuch as I can't even tell you what this *means*."

In the physical nature of the defect, it was most obviously closest to Down's syndrome, an identical glitch but involving a different pair of chromosomes. Clearly, Clay Palmer exhibited none of the symptoms characteristic of Down's. He was highly intelligent, physically healthy, with no skull deformation or slanted eyes, no indication of heart disorder.

Chromosome twelve. Here too were located genes associated with hemolytic anemia, lipoma, myxoid liposarcoma, type-one vitamin D dependency, and —

Acute alcohol intolerance.

This could be a find. Clay had been hospitalized more than once for alcohol poisoning.

Her weekend was lost in a density of specialization and the vast interior landscape, never without a book, reading wherever opportunity presented itself: kitchen, office, bathroom, behind the wheel while stopped at traffic

lights, on the sofa while failing to realize that for the past ten minutes Sarah's feet had been in her lap. In learning there was safety, for to set the books aside was to remove the diversion and nakedly confront the fact that she was absolutely petrified.

Because what does it mean? What does this mean *in terms of his body and his mind?*

In her hospital sat a young man who by turns sought to tear himself and other people to pieces, the worst of his impulses held in check by a fragile grasp on the hope that he might learn to become something better. Whether a noble quest or a fool's errand, Clay Palmer had seemingly yet to decide, but the outcome was largely up to her. If she was correct, Clay might only be months away from committing the ultimate irrevocable crime, after which intervention would become a moot point. His future would consist of prison, or death.

He had looked to her for help. And she was going to have to look him in the eye and tell him the truth, along with the words she hated most of all:

I'm sorry … I don't know.

*

And how inadequate these words sounded to her ears. Who, though, among healers of body and mind, felt adequately trained in dealing out disappointment? Who felt comfortable admitting there were syndromes beyond their expertise, beyond even their knowledge? What pompous pretenders they all were at times. Their understanding of the totality of human life was barbarously crude, not far beyond using leeches and trephining holes into the skull to release evil spirits.

When Clay looked at her, it was with the same lost melancholy another's face might have worn after being told a parent had died, or a sibling, a favorite grandparent … someone who had always been there, now gone. It was the face of downward spirals, and Adrienne pictured Clay sliding helplessly along a coil of double helix.

Thirty-two thousand miles. He might never hit bottom.

"It's me, then." His whisper was as soft as the sound of a knife on a throat.

His room felt cold for no good reason, or was she the only one who noticed? It was Monday afternoon, hell of a way to start the week — you

seem to be coming along nicely in our sessions, and by the way, did you know you're a freak of nature?

"I thought it was something I could work on, try to beat," he said, "but it's *me*…"

"Clay, please listen, there's no reason to believe that. It's too early to conclude *what* effect this might have on you, or even if it has one at all."

"It's me, it's *me*," and his voice curled into a low chant of loathing, *"it's me,"* weighted forearms beginning to clash against each other, the casts striking as hammer and anvil, each blow harder than the last. Eyes wide, an acute madness brought on by knowledge — he had looked into deformity and found himself staring back. Black hair in tangles that fell into his eyes, he burned upon a pyre of his own fears, and she had no way to assuage them.

"It's me and it's in every fucking cell in my *body*!" Clay screamed.

He was off the bed before she realized what he was doing, lurching across the room to the far wall, throwing himself whole-bodied into a murderous swing at the chain link over the window. The cast — his right — rebounded with an atonal twang of metal, and he battered away at it again as she went for the door, holding it open, nodding into the hall while in they came, the enforcers of the asylum she'd had waiting just in case. He was code blue all over again, and succeeded in impacting the chain link with enough force to drive it into the window behind. Glass shattered, but if he wanted shards he was out of luck, nothing had fallen inside, so he sagged down the wall while turning on himself. Reddened fingertips hooked just beyond the ends of the casts, ragged nails in need of trimming. Clay seemed to regard his body as something hideous beyond tolerance, head straining on neck as if to distance itself from torso. With those heavy, clawed hands he ripped at the T-shirt under his robe, shredded through to the skin beneath.

He tore.

He tore.

The orderlies were on him before he knew they had entered the room. Arms seized, he was dragged away from the wall, sobbing. His last recourse at venting the corrosive rage was to snap, and try to bite.

Convulsing and nailed to the floor by other hands, enforced cruciform pose and raw bleeding stomach and raked chest and old ribbed scars from older hatreds turned inward, he met her eyes just once…

Then followed the needle all the way to his arm.

As many times as it took.

*

It was the curse of the evening shift: One could never get off at midnight and have enough time to drown workday sorrows in a long night of binge drinking. She'd be lucky to get in three rounds before last call.

Home, then, home and a bottle. Nobody could run her out of home before she was good and ready.

Adrienne turned on the stereo before pouring the first drink, volume low because Sarah was already asleep upstairs. Music had its charms, a companion that never judged failures. She could listen to the enchantment of Celtic song and believe in the magic of beautiful dark-haired women with the throats of angels.

She found the note in the kitchen, taped to the freezer door, where she wouldn't miss it. Sarah's expansive, loopy hand:

I invented a new drink tonight: the peanut butter daiquiri. It sticks to the roof of your liver.

Are you smiling?

I love you and I think you're working too hard.

Adrienne peeled it away from the door — smiling, yes — and brushed it with her fingertips, some new kind of Braille, seeking love, any connection. Such mementos she kept in a small box upstairs, always meaning to get around to sorting them and giving them a proper scrapbook home, but never finding the time.

Her drink of choice tonight was gin over ice with a squeeze of lime. She carried it to the sofa and sank into both.

And what of Clay, this late hour? Calmed out of his senses, strapped into his bed in case he was feigning stupor, or woke up cranky. Three and a half weeks of lithium might as well have been breath mints, for all the good it had done him. Given enough of a trigger, he could have exploded at any time.

Still…

He had not.

So which had been the greater force within him: self-control, or medication? Her every assumption about him was now in a tenuous new light. Oh, she could talk, all right, could spin textbook reassurances in

accordance with proper methodology: no reason to believe his genetic condition had anything to do with behavioral affect, cognitive defect, emotional maladaptation, nothing to indicate any connection at all…

And it would have been miraculous if this had reassured him. She wasn't even fooling herself. This was simply beyond all understanding.

Adrienne got a second drink and returned to the sofa with the rainstick kept propped in one corner. It had been made in the shadow of the Andes, a meter of thin Normata cactus. While dead and drying, its spines had been pressed into the hollow body, which some peasant artisan had then filled with pebbles and fragments of bone, before sealing the end.

She upended it slowly, like an hourglass, and listened to the cascade of pebbles and bone over delicate spines, a rippling sound like a sweet July shower. Sarah had bought this for her for their first month's anniversary, after Adrienne's passing remark that she missed the rains of San Francisco.

Prayers for rain; the Diaguitas of Chile used rainsticks to serenade their gods. In more superstitious moments, she fancied she could do likewise: serenade elder gods of the mind, summoning the spirits of Jung and Fromm; prayers for a deluge of insight.

"Paper didn't say anything about rain."

Sarah slouched in the doorway to the hall, frowzy-headed and squinting against the light. She wore rumpled socks and a T-shirt that fell to mid-thigh, promoting some den called Club Cannibal, on the Ivory Coast. She braved the light and came on in.

"I woke you, I'm sorry."

Sarah, waving it off, half-asleep and squinty, shuffled around the sofa to lean over and wrap her arms around Adrienne's shoulders. Their heads knocked lightly together, black hair on blond. She felt the tender press of lips to her neck.

"You look whipped," Sarah murmured.

Adrienne fought it, finally shut her eyes and nodded. "I'm sitting here second-guessing myself. It takes some effort."

Sarah kissed her again and came around to join her. Adrienne set aside the rainstick, listened to its final trickling.

"Are you ready to talk to me?"

Here again was that breach of ethics, that forbidden sharing of privileged information. She had often compared her profession with

religious vocations and their inevitable crises: priests who doubted, nuns who lusted, vice versa. Encouraged to seek guidance only from others in the same fold, they would get such a narrow perspective in return, wouldn't they? Such myopia had never made sense to her. Sometimes you needed a confessor from beyond your own circle, if only to remember there was another world out there, with other ways of thinking.

So she told: Clay and the test, the results and his reaction. Feeling no better, but less alone, and less alone can be a lot.

"You had an obligation to tell him," Sarah said. "There's no way around that."

"I *know* that" — Adrienne was gesturing more emphatically than she realized — "but it's the timing, I thought he was strong enough to deal with it, I really did. I completely misjudged it, the chance he'd revert back to an earlier state where he'd try mutilating himself."

"But look at the kind of news it was. Do you think there's a *good* time to hit somebody with something like that?"

Point well made. Perhaps the true measure of her progress with Clay would be how well he acclimatized himself to the test results over the next several days — not his immediate devastation.

"And consider this: You'd have to tell him eventually. If you told him it came back normal and then admitted you'd been lying, no matter how well-intentioned the reason, how do you think he'd feel then?"

"Betrayed. Maybe manipulated."

"You're damn right he would. I would."

You would, wouldn't you? And you'd be furious about it, too. A part of Sarah was like Clay, on some rudimentary level. Odd how it had never occurred to Adrienne before. Impulsive, a bit untamed, now and again given to fanciful rumination, Clay was like Sarah would be with all the restraints chipped away, leaving only a core of desperation, confused hungers, and panic-stricken rage.

"So isn't all you can do, really," Sarah said, "is help him come to terms with that news?"

"It doesn't seem enough."

"Sure it is. People can deal with some ungodly stressful situations, as long as they know what they are. It's when they don't know what they're up against that they start to break down." Sarah scooted close enough to drop

both hands onto Adrienne's thigh. "That's why there's myth, to help people deal with those unknowns that are just too threatening to leave unknown."

"But Sarah, that's the problem here: an entire huge unknown area just opened up and swallowed us both. I had to tell him because his condition *might* be significant to his problems … and because it's going to attract a lot of attention to him that I don't think he's going to want at all."

"And that's what you're most afraid of. You know that, don't you?"

Adrienne frowned at her. *What?*

"Losing control. Having him taken away from you."

Objections rose: *He's my patient; I just want what's best for him.* But of course it was true: She felt she was most qualified to make those judgments. Was this why doctors could squabble so over patients as if they were territories instead of people? With flags of conquest and discovery speared into their bodies? To surrender to someone else's authority, then, was weakness and retreat.

"That doesn't make me selfish, does it?" Adrienne said.

"We're all selfish, it's what motivates us."

As if to prove it, Sarah braced her hands on Adrienne's knees and leaned forward to kiss her, hungry greedy mouth at her own and bright eyes continuing to stare as she held the kiss. Wide mouth breaking into a broad smile then, wanton, just before she drew Adrienne's lower lip in and bit. Neither hard nor soft, bordering on that delicious threshold of tender pain.

Hands next, meeting before each went to the other body, to shoulders, and to breasts with straining nipples, and to bellies flexing with quickened breath, and to groins; so much moist heat. From her own, from Sarah's, Sarah so easy to get to, naked beneath the T-shirt but for panties. Sarah straddled her lap, then rose on knees, pulling Adrienne's head roughly to her, and Adrienne drew back, opened her eyes to see the shirt, its tribal mask design staring at her. Whereas it had been funny before, now she found something ominous about it. The mask, the unchanging face created to hide the real one, the countenance that could not be reasoned with.

"Take that off," she whispered fiercely, and Sarah peeled it, cast it free, not even suspecting. It struck the rainstick, sent it falling to the rug for one last sprinkle of pebbles and bone.

She'd have been happy to let it happen there on the sofa, or to slip to the floor and spread each other wide upon the rug, but Sarah's plans were

otherwise. This was to be no quickie. Adrienne let Sarah pull her up, to her feet, up to the bedroom and down on her back again, where the last of the clothing came off.

They embraced, they rolled; teeth bit and lips soothed, and tongues traced wet trails from mouths to breasts to navels to cunts and back again. Their hands were slippery, drenched with one another's dew. Adrienne bent her back across the bed, slid her hands along Sarah's risen inner thighs and lowered her head, peeling Sarah open with fingers and tongue. Tasting her damp and hot, teasing her with pointed flicking tongue tip, tickling her with soft blond hair, at last plunging her mouth into the wet fire.

And when Sarah came, it was hard, loud, powerful hips flexing and thighs clamping onto Adrienne's head. Then Sarah went scrambling for the night table where they kept their toys. Adrienne heard the scrape of the drawer, all aching mouth and wet face, gasping for breath as she saw Sarah coming for her — not empty-handed. No choice in the matter, just Sarah sculpting her onto knees and elbows, leaning across her back and wrapping one arm down and around her middle, with the other working the phallus into her. Roughly, but not without love, and Adrienne was about to strangle on her own cries. It was like being violated, willingly, and if she said to stop, Sarah would, but Sarah's power came from knowing it would never happen.

Adrienne looked back over her shoulder, saw Sarah first in profile, then as she turned to meet her eyes: Sarah in sweaty gleaming heat, with clenched teeth and furious stroking arm. For a moment she imagined the face from the T-shirt over Sarah's own, cannibal mask leering down; surely the symbol of what was going on here, the message implicit in every grinding twist of her hand…

You are mine, and so is control, and I will devour you and I will savor the taste of everything taken because you wanted to give it all along.

The body could never lie.

Nine

Ryker, from Arizona Associated Labs, came clean with Adrienne later that week. She still wasn't sure what to make of the fact that he had for days — *days* — sat on what could have the most significant impact yet on Clay Palmer's case.

Had it been a deliberate lie, or simply a withholding of facts for the sake of convenience, while Ryker and company figured out how to best address the situation for their own ends? Her guess leaned toward mercenary origins. The competition for leverage in medicine, particularly in research, was no less cutthroat than in most other private-sector ventures simply because human welfare was involved. There was also funding to consider. Funding meant the chance for greater accomplishment, which in turn meant prestige, and led to funding greater still…

They'd led her to believe that they thought Clay was the first of his kind, the first gross chromosomal abnormality discovered in over two decades — news that would have penetrated their world like a ricocheting bullet. Could they *really* have expected her to believe that they — immersed in the science of genetics — had not immediately recognized that this was not the case?

The bottom line?

While the numbers were tiny, there *were* others.

Clay was not alone in the world.

Ryker followed up his phone call apprising her of this shock with a package of records compiled on the others found to have a third copy of chromosome twelve.

The defect had been discovered six years ago, in the genetics division of a Boston research center named MacNealy Biotech, and had been christened Helverson's syndrome after the first scientist to document it.

Known cases prior to Clay were at an even dozen: five in North America, one in Venezuela, four across Great Britain and Western Europe, and two in Japan. Not all, however, were still alive. The Venezuelan, who had worked in the north coast oil industry, had committed suicide last year.

A British soldier of fortune had been killed in Central America. As well, one of the Americans was on death row in Texas, following a string of gas station robberies that had left three attendants dead…

And Adrienne could see the pattern forming already, another aggression linkage to rival, even surpass, the panic button pushed by the discovery of the double-Y.

Still, one look at the overview was enough: Based on the few known cases, the hope that Helverson's syndrome was totally benign was not encouraging. Statistics on the group were broken down to demonstrate over and over generally maladaptive patterns. There was an inarguable trend here toward explosive temperaments, random acts of impulsive violence, self-destructive tendencies, and, to a lesser extent, schizophrenia. It cut across every national boundary and appeared independent of such variables as ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and education.

Interesting, though, how every last one was male, with none older than thirty-five. As well, she noticed another unifying factor: All came from industrialized countries. This said little in itself — the technology to map out chromosomes was far less prevalent in third-world nations, although more was being done in such places all the time as static local populations were found where various disorders plagued large numbers of the people. Such closed-system settlements constituted living laboratories in which to trace genetic disorders through multiple generations. Perhaps, in time, some agrarian society would yield its first Helverson's subject. Until then…

Here they were. Like bad omens.

In reading the overview, it was easy to forget that each one was a person who appeared to have undergone his own variation of Clay's life. They had been afflicted and did not even know by what, much less why.

Did they all feel the pain of the outsider, who does not even fit on a molecular level, and did they reprogram that pain into anger? Did they go through each day with heartbeats and brainwaves out of tune with those of the masses? She saw their lives as testament to a cruelty in nature that went beyond ill intent: nature's profound indifference, giving periodic mutant rise to her variants, then leaving them to struggle and thrive, or wane and die, on their own.

It caused her to stop and stare at the skin of her bared forearm, its smooth and pale underside. There, deep within, written in protein codes 100

trillion times over: *herself*. What guarantee did she have that there was nothing concealed in that text of life and death, hidden like a bomb in a skyscraper, ticking, waiting for its moment? Waiting to burst into terrible flower — tumors or breakdown of systemic function, something that might leave her mind intact while her body withered, or steal the mind while the body housed its deterioration for decades to come.

She was no less susceptible to the indifference of nature than any of them.

It made her all the more eager to set the overview aside, to quit thinking of them as a faceless aggregate and view them as individuals. She began to open each separately sealed case study, files and medical records and interview transcripts and photos.

One…

After another…

After another…

And it became obvious that there was at least one physical manifestation of Helverson's common to each of them.

They looked as if they could be brothers.

By the third one Adrienne wasn't even reading, just tearing into the files to get at the pictures, spreading them out into rows. All of them stared up from the tabletop like a bizarre family reunion. Variations, to be sure: hair color, eye color, skin tone. But structurally, the resemblance was eerie, all of them much like Clay: the subtle arch and curve of bones made streamlined, contoured as if to lean into wind; small bladelike noses and firm chins, and jawlines that curved efficiently around; watchful eyes, wary, few of them smiling. It was even noticeable beneath the more overtly Asian traits of the two Japanese.

They were not unattractive — to the contrary, in most cases — but taken together, they could not help but be unsettling. And in the smooth contours of their faces, so perfect in image after image, there was something almost reptilian about them—

And damn it, she was regarding them as a group again.

Yet it was so hard not to. Like brothers, as if some father with wanderlust had, thirty-five years ago, began to circle the globe and sow the seeds of a deviant progeny. His sperm somehow overpowering the

theoretically equal influence of maternal genes, to leave these women's wombs growing with children solely of his creation.

Again, she was letting her imagination roam too far. Further reading showed that even such an astronomically low possibility as a common father had been ruled out. Genetic testing was nothing if not precise in ascertaining parental lineage, although the remote possibility of some very distant common ancestor had not yet been ruled out. For the time being, though, they had only chromosome twelve in common.

She was brought back to thoughts of Down's syndrome and the stunning resemblance between most of those who bore it. Short and stocky, with slanted eyes and similarly shaped heads, frequently affectionate like eternal children, they had always struck her as brothers and sisters of their own extended family, beyond the claims of blood kinship. They were their own; apart, yet linked.

And here, now? Before her?

The opposite of Down's?

Was it such a farfetched notion? For, in time, didn't nature strive to balance everything with its polar counterpart?

Nature did, so often, exhibit a love affair with symmetry.

*

She monitored Clay daily after having broken the news of the karyotype to him. Physically he would be fine, his bludgeoning of the window having caused nothing worse than some damage to the cast and a hairline fracture in a healing carpal bone, while the claw marks on his torso had been bandaged.

He emerged from sedation uncommunicative, less sullen than simply withdrawn, and gradually coming out of that within a few days. He was showing improvement by the time Adrienne learned of the others, although she had decided to withhold that from him until he was back on more stable emotional ground. Naturally he would want to know what they were like. Understandably, he would find the truth of no encouragement.

"I accept it," he finally told her, during their next Sunday session. Looking drawn and pale, too many weeks away from a sun that he apparently needed, like a tonic, from time to time.

And she told him that was important, accepting the fact of Helverson's, as long as he wasn't accepting some preconceived notion that it rigidly

predestined his life. Nature, nurture, the debate had raged for centuries, and would likely never be settled to the satisfaction of everyone. It was important he keep in mind that he was more than mere proteins and programming.

"Do you think it's possible we know when things are wrong with us?" he asked. "Deep, fundamental differences that set us apart. Even if we don't have names for them, or even know where to point in ourselves … we just know? You think so?"

"Obviously *you* do," she said, turning it back.

He glared for a moment, and she saw the faces of the others buried in him, as if he carried ghosts. "Can't we have sixty seconds of conversation without you deflecting it around into some therapeutic proverb?"

Adrienne blinked. *Very good, Clay.* It was actually a boost to see him rise up like that. If he hadn't gotten some of his fighting spirit back, he wouldn't have cared.

"I think," she told him, slow enough to measure every word, "some people have a greater self-awareness than others … and I think it's possible that could extend to the physical or chemical makeup of their bodies."

"Thank you," he said, with a rare smile of victory. It faded soon enough, replaced by a look of haunting recollection. "I never told you why I came down this way."

"You told me you had a lot of thinking to do."

He nodded. "But why *then*? Why up and decide one day that I needed it more than I did the day before?"

"Something happened?"

"Something I saw." Clay took a deep breath, leaned back with his eyes shut in their darkened hollows, saying nothing until he began to bite his lower lip. "I don't hold jobs well," he began at last. "You probably guessed that already. But for the past year or so I worked for the Department of Sanitation in Denver. And that was all right, I got along okay doing that. I guess I've lost that one now, too, though.

"When we'd finish the pickup rounds and haul the truck back to the dump, sometimes I'd go wandering around all those mountains of trash. Everything the city was retching up, there it was. We could poke through it, and if there was anything we wanted, it was ours. Most of the time I wasn't

even looking for my own benefit, I was looking for stuff for Graham. Remember Graham?"

"The artist." It had been weeks since Clay had mentioned him.

Clay nodded, sat straighter. "I'd bring him things I thought he'd like to use, for inspiration or whatever. Scraps of metal, bits of machinery. He's doing something with power tools and appliances and things like that, but he won't tell anybody what it is, so I'd just grab anything that looked halfway interesting.

"So there it was, one afternoon, the middle of September, one of those days when you can barely feel it, but there's a chill coming. And I was scouting around this one edge of the dump where I probably shouldn't have been, because that's where the cranes were working. They lower those scoops, like big swinging mouths from metal dinosaurs, and rearrange the piles. They'd tell us it's dangerous to get around, but what the hell, that's when you can turn up the most interesting junk.

"I came around one side of this smelly mountain, saw where part of it had fallen away, where there was this little hollow. I just stopped, and stared.

"There was a dead man in there. Not like he'd been dumped and that was the most convenient place they could find. I think he'd been killed there, maybe even some kind of ritual thing. His wrists, they'd been spread out and tied to something half-buried in the trash — the legs of an old desk, it might have been. There he was, just slumped down, sitting in all this dried blood. He'd been gutted, all this stuff strewn out of his abdomen. Not random, either, there was order to it. But none of it seemed *human* to me, because he'd been there long enough for it to start drying out, so what it really looked like, to me, was pipes and tubes and conduits, like that. I'd never seen anybody's plumbing before, and that's what it's like. Meat machinery. So there he was, all dirty white, and not moving — plastic bags and paper and just general shit hanging off him. And all I could do was stare."

Adrienne had to force herself to breathe. Imagining the scene for herself: an eviscerated man and the carrion stench that must have surrounded him, in the shadow of a valley between mountains of trash, while smoke from refuse fires churned overhead, machinery swaying in the

background. She was seasoned, and rarely was she forced to conceal genuine repugnance, but this was one of those moments.

"The sight of him," she said, "it didn't … upset you."

"It was repulsive. But you can't deny it: What's repulsive is also fascinating. I kept staring because it didn't seem real. Five or ten minutes, it must have been. And then one of the cranes swung over, and the whole hillside came avalanching down on him. Buried him completely. So I walked away."

"Without reporting it to anyone?"

He shook his head. "Except for whoever put him there in the first place, I guess I'm the only one who knows he's there."

Clay didn't say anything else, seeming distanced from that afternoon, describing it almost as if it had happened to someone else. She tried to use the growing spotlight of silence to coax more from him, but this time it wasn't working.

"What was it about the experience that made you feel you had to leave home for a while?"

He stared down, as if answers were to be found on the floor. "I'd been looking at him for a minute or two, trying to figure out how long he'd been there. Overnight, I was guessing. And then I had to stop and think: *Well hell, where was* I *last night?* For a few seconds, I didn't know. No memory, nothing. I came out of it after a minute, and I knew I hadn't done it. But that didn't make me feel relieved, not really, because I started thinking, *Well, if it wasn't me, maybe it* could *have been, and could I really* do *that to someone, if I went out of my head?* It was like getting slapped in the face, and hearing somebody tell me, 'You've got a lot bigger problem than you ever thought.'"

Adrienne pulled herself out of it a little at a time — a vague feeling of uncleanness, the clash of values in how she could never have left a murder victim behind, a secret buried by a city's refuse — and likely Clay never knew she was trying so hard not to judge. She spoke again of predatory ethics versus the conscience he obviously had somewhere within, if not always accessible. Spoke of the way people could latch onto symbols of their guilt over events entirely unrelated. He was no killer. Was he?

Not yet.

"When you told me about my chromosomes," he said, mouth curling down, "that about did me in. But I asked, didn't I?"

Adrienne noticed that he was actually trembling. Another peek into vulnerabilities only rarely glimpsed. It reminded her of pets owned when she was younger, taking them to a kennel or the vet; thrust into circumstances beyond their understanding, their warm furry bodies seeming smaller as they huddled, gripped by fear's seizure. Her heart would break, always.

Clay, trembling.

"But I remembered a few weeks ago I said I'd keep talking to you because it could be one more step toward understanding myself. That's why I'm here now. I might not always like what I find out, or even take it very well … but all I want to do is stay in this for the duration."

*

The quest for self-knowledge was a noble endeavor, as she saw it, but it didn't exist in a vacuum. Clay could look within, and she could show him where, could help dry the tears when what he saw there seemed too ugly or hopeless to bear.

But it had gone beyond that now: Clay one of the rarest genetic commodities in existence, one of less than a dozen living known Helverson's syndrome lab rats on the globe. What had been a routinely simple, balanced doctor-patient dyad was opened up to accommodate new strangers with degrees, with hypotheses, with agendas of own, and a never-ending catalog of questions.

Who comprises his biological family?

Has he any brothers, sisters?

Any children that he has fathered?

Any somatic deviations noted — physiological, biochemical, neurological, and so forth?

Any pronounced differences in his healing faculties?

What behavioral patterns are exhibited when he is confronted with a controlled battery of stress-inducing stimuli?

May we have additional tissue samples?

More, and more, and more.

Specialists all, geneticists with concentrations in development and population and other fields, along with their affiliate researchers in mutation's other ramifications, they made the cross-town pilgrimage from Arizona Associated Labs to see the new prize. Paying heed to the protocol

of hospital hierarchy, they were warmly received by Dr. Ferris Mendenhall, who conferred with Adrienne, who in turn approached Clay, partly on their behalf, partly for his own: "They want to learn more about you — they'll be able to find out more than I or anyone else on this hospital staff can."

"It doesn't mean they'll be replacing you, does it?" seemed to be his main concern.

She shook her head. "No. You'll just have busier days here, is all."

Clay shrugged. "That doesn't sound entirely bad, you know."

Adrienne smiled, forcing it, this time touching him on one cast and the thin fingertips protruding from its end. They felt cold before he drew them away. Cold as her silly sense of loss, forced to share, forced to work and play well with others whose interest in Clay was based on his status as an oddity — and really, shouldn't she be beyond this sort of petty resentment?

That doesn't sound entirely bad…?

I do hope you can still say that by the time they decide they're through with you…

If they ever do.

*

Bad? No, not at first, nothing that distressed him, pained him, certainly nothing that bored him. It was all new. The body, oh, they were big on that, poking, prodding, charting, loading him into machines that ground electronically around him and bombarded him with radiation, magnetic fields, whatever could be used to peer inside without the aid of a scalpel. Not that they were far away from that particular violation either.

Blood and hair samples, tissue scrapings, urine specimens — here you go, have one on me. Humans make such wonderful resources, for they are always renewable.

He laid his brain open to them — these doctors who had no need for names, they were just the tall one, the stubby one, the one with clammy hands, the one with the mole on her cheek. With every day that passed, Dr. Adrienne Rand accrued new dimensions of reality by comparison. These others, they were inquisitive to the point of farce, comical in their seriousness, surreal in their relentless clinical precision. They were Nazis.

But if even one could train a penlight on some previously shadowed corner inside him, to illuminate a malignant growth he could squash like a vermin, it might all be worth it.

He free-associated, looked at Rorschach blots, composed extemporaneous stories to accompany flash cards. They measured his intelligence with a battery of tests, qualified his personality traits with the MMPI, inquired of his sex life and his dreams.

They described situations for him and asked how he would react. *You are confronted by a mugger on the street. What do you do?*

I'd try to tear the asshole's head off. How do you think I ended up here*, genius?*

You are alone after work in an office and realize your boss has left his filing cabinet unlocked. Somewhere in one drawer, you know that there is a file containing employee evaluations. What do you do?

I'd make copies of all of them and sell them to whoever wanted a look at their own or anybody else's.

You are told by someone you love and have lived with for two years that she is leaving you. How do you react?

Can we ... can we stop for today?

What do you do?

What do you do?

What do you do?

It was better than working, he supposed: regular hours but no one whose approval he was trying to maintain. Just be himself and they were satisfied. Although it wasn't as if he was drawing a paycheck, was it? And here he was, exerting as much effort as any of them. They would go back to their labs flushed with success, having peeled back another layer … but only because he had agreed to show it to them. That should be worth something, shouldn't it? For with every day that passed, it felt less and less as if he were going to get much benefit out of this at all. They were happy to see him only because of *what* he was, not *who*, and his problems were only buzzwords in their terminology.

This was no arrangement of mutual beneficiaries.

And then the gene meddlers led him down the primrose path of the past, to shove it into his face. He was the son of his mother and father, all right — but still with his own secrets yet to be explained.

They had arranged for his parents to be screened back home in Minneapolis, the both of them eager to yield up their tired blood for the sake of a son neither seen nor heard from for four years. There had been no

sign of Helverson's syndrome in either of them. Naturally. Their DNA had been free of taint, the both of them pure and unadulterated specimens. Proud veteran and loving home-maker, these two were suburbia, they were America at its finest. Fascist and alcoholic, they were every self-perpetuating shame concealed and denied behind a picket fence and a gingham curtain.

Of course they had checked out fine — they had no *need* of chromosomes gone awry. They were ruined in so many other ways.

Did they tell you about the dead ones? Clay considered asking. *The weaker ones, my brothers and sisters that died in the crib, or never drew a single breath outside the womb at all? They let you in on that family legacy?*

Not asking, fearing the answer. Imagining ghouls in lab smocks dispersed in a cemetery, seeking the powdery old bones of babies dead for twenty years. Here's a shovel — we'll expect the karyotype by tomorrow afternoon.

And then the inevitable. Here was a scenario better than any fabricated stress test:

You have spent the last four years of your existence trying to amputate yourself from a spawning ground of hypocrisy and ineffectuality and meaninglessness. You have tried to tell yourself that you have no love left for them, that they forfeited it long ago in ways they could never possibly imagine. You know they tried to kill you one screaming nerve at a time. You were the abortion that lived. And now they want to see you, your parents want to see you. What do you do?

What do you do?

What do you do?

I tell you to go to hell. And then…

I cry.

*

Clinicians, even in his dreams —

meat-metal god-puppets in caverns of iron, deep, deep, where boilers thump and steam-jets hiss scalding clouds that condense to drip from tiny screaming mouths, and gray-cheeked faces of slag pile fetuses heaped halfway to ceiling

in lab coats of rust they welcome him, Clay, star patient, welcome to the convulsion factory: you are meat, you are nerve endings, and you are ours

the examination table a vast slab, corrosive with its crusted layers, black on red on gray, runneled with fluid runoff troughs, and here they spread him, arms and legs akimbo, *Dr. Mengele, I presume?* and in he leans with trigger finger spastic, Clay pinned by rivet-gun crucifixion, wrist, wrist, ankle, foot, the peg nails burning molten red to sear flesh to bone to charred marrow

girders like steel bone, clanking down from ceiling and up from floor to hold him in place, organic straps tightening across his forehead/throat/ribs/hips/knees, becoming one with the slab in symbiotic bondage —

and he feels the pulsing shudder of gears, turn, turn, grind, ratcheting the slab to lengths never hinted at by its cold hard solidity

clank

clank

screams drowned out by piercing bone-saw whine in his ears as they hack at him with tools growing from their limbs like phallic pistons, we will penetrate you in 100 trillion orifices

a stranger is just an enemy you haven't assessed yet

pierced a thousand times over with razored syringes whose plungers slide back to draw blood flowing like rust-water clots

what do you do? what do you do? what do you do?

tearing one hand free to leave half his palm behind, bleeding and welded to the slab, throbbing hand a brute weapon now, to lash at tormentors with sallow alloy skins

even as fragile bones crack under strain

even as the slab rends him into component parts and his last sensation is a collision between machine and heavy clubbed hand

and blood sprinkling in his eyes with a caustic burning like acid baths and bitter autumn rains —

*

A nurse found him collapsed in the hallway some twenty feet from the door of his room, bleeding and barely conscious. The gash on his forehead took twelve stitches.

I've got to get out of here — this while they were sewing him up, and it felt like the clearest thought he'd had in days.

Ten

Never beloved, sometimes despised, in antiquity a sacrificial lamb: the bearer of bad news was this, and more.

"Night before last, at approximately 3:30 A.M., Clay Palmer suffered a particularly vivid nightmare related to his recent experiences here and nearly gave himself a concussion with one of his casts, while thrashing in his sleep. He was treated in the emergency room and received twelve stitches above the left eye, which is now swollen almost completely shut."

Adrienne paused for a sip of water and glanced beyond her briefing notes, to take in the faces around her in the conference room. Unhappy, for the most part, dour beneath the unflattering fluorescent wash. Ferris Mendenhall and one of his superiors from hospital administration, plus a small contingent from Associated Labs — Ryker and three others. The finer particulars of their association had been settled upon without her being there, but she had to assume that Clay had, this past week and a half, become something of a hospital asset, bringing in income rather than draining it as a problem case whose insurance was in contention.

Mutation makes for strange bedfellows.

Three hours of sleep, a chilly shower, and a large espresso gulped in the car while fighting the morning rush hour, and here she was: out of her element and treading water in bureaucratic seas. Onward.

"Early yesterday afternoon Clay expressed his intention to discontinue cooperation with all further research into his genetic condition. And for the first time since his arrival, he requested to be discharged. He said that if there's any attempt made to keep him here, the first chance he gets at a telephone, he'll put in a call to the ACLU and will refuse to eat. I spoke with him at length yesterday, and briefly this morning before this meeting, and his position hasn't changed."

Murmurs, discontent: the ungrateful prick.

"Correct me if I'm wrong," said one of the geneticists, "but I've been working with him under the assumption that he's in Ward Five under voluntary commitment."

"That's correct," Mendenhall answered.

"Then is there a possibility of *in*voluntary commitment?"

She bit her tongue, deferring to Mendenhall. Tried to show no expression as she doodled on her notes a stick caricature of the man, tall and balding, with a mad eager grin, dashing feet, and an upraised butterfly net. *There — take that.*

"That would be ill-advised, in my opinion. But then, that's just based on twice-weekly reports, and not personal evaluation." Mendenhall turned to Adrienne. "You've spent more time with him than anyone at this table. What's your opinion?"

"If it came to a sanity hearing, Clay would walk. And I'd be the star witness in his favor." Shaking her head. "He just wants to go home."

"You wouldn't say he presents a danger to himself or anyone else, then." Dr. Ryker this time, slender and compact and possessed of extremely direct eye contact. He no doubt made a fine supervisor, she reasoned, because he could make any subordinate squirm.

"His impulse control has been reasonably stable," she said.

"Stable." Ryker raised an eyebrow. "Night before last he nearly staved in his own forehead."

"I doubt there's a person in this room who hasn't thrashed at some point during a nightmare. If they'd had casts on both hands, the exact same thing might've happened."

"Nearly two weeks ago he smashed a window and mutilated his stomach." Ryker pressed a slim advantage as if it were a stiletto. "And a week before that, you yourself implied to Dr. Mendenhall that Clay Palmer was a menace who desperately needed attention because his violent outbursts were worsening."

"I wasn't pleading for his confinement. I was requesting a chance to continue treating him because he seemed to be responding well to it" — *and because he fascinated the hell out of me?* — "and he wanted to continue. If he no longer does … there's no rationale for forcing it on him." She drew a breath and raised a finger to silence an interruption, let her summarize. "Clay is emotionally disturbed, somewhat self-destructive, and he's prone to violence when provoked. But he is *not* irrational or out of touch with reality or any less able to function in the world than any of millions of people on the streets right now. Can I say he won't commit an

act that'll jeopardize his entire future? No, I'm sorry, I can't. Neither can I guarantee that about you or anyone else. But the law doesn't recognize the risk of future offenses as grounds for imprisonment."

"The right judge might see it differently. This is hardly a typical case."

A woman from the lab spoke up, a research psychologist who had been administering a trunkful of tests. "So let's assume that a judge does. Does it make Clay any more cooperative?"

"Possibly, if what he's doing is throwing a tantrum. Even the most unruly child gets tired of kicking and holding his breath, sooner or later."

But this is not a child you're discussing! She quelled an impulse to shout this into Ryker's face. Bowed out with little to contribute as they debated and weighed options among themselves. To listen was an education in itself, a crash course in everything that was wrong with the state of modern science, the fundamental evidence being that the last consideration on their minds was that they were here because of the sufferings of a human being.

That they could do their jobs was not in doubt. But they would live and work in a peculiar vacuum of their own creation. Science was no longer the innocent, leisurely pursuit of well-bred Victorian gentlemen and aristocrats. Its two fundamental consumers were now private industry and the military, under whose influence science was no longer about discovery and understanding for their own sake, but for the perpetuation of power and profit. Bettering the human condition was, more often than not, incidental.

So, was most of this crew naturally insensitive to Clay's pain, or were they simply victims of systemic failure?

She would give them the benefit of the doubt. They were all beholden to the checkbooks that fed them, with too desperate an interest in maintaining that support to be objective. Among them was no such thing as a generalist, and with their focus trained on the narrow parameters of practical application, little wonder they had trouble seeing a broader spectrum beyond the lab walls. Little wonder they overlooked human dimensions, even when confronted with a deviation that cut to the core of humanity.

Compared to them, her interest in Clay felt more pure than it had in weeks. She'd worried about that, wondering at times if she weren't just one more carrion eater who simply wore a kinder face as she too picked away, at the expense of his feelings. Watching the growing volume of tapes made

of their sessions, her thickening file of notes, wondering, *What does it all mean, what does* he *mean … and where am I really going with this?*

And when Ferris Mendenhall gazed long and pensively at a note slid to him by Ryker, then nodded, and politely asked if she would mind stepping from the room for a few minutes, Adrienne had no idea why.

*

She paced out in the hall, restless, the espresso humming through her bloodstream. *Take up smoking while waiting? Why not.* Adrienne understood the appeal, some mindless function to assign her hands and mouth.

Catching her reflection in a window overlooking a parking lot five floors below, and homes beyond, she scrutinized. Had she erred somewhere? Not professional enough in demeanor? Did they intend to bulldoze her right out of having any say at all regarding Clay Palmer? She was every bit as educated and degreed as most of them in there — barring an exception or two — so why did she get the feeling they looked down on her?

Because they fed from a richer trough, that's why. They did not get bogged down in the small, middling lives of individuals whose existence never touched the world they knew of, and who died struggling against pain, alone, anonymously.

When they called her back in, she resumed her place at the table and steadied herself to hear almost anything.

Except what they actually said.

"Would you be prepared," said Mendenhall, with drooping moustache and burnished forehead, more resembling a cattle baron than the administrator of a psychiatric ward, "to accept a temporary leave of absence to go to Denver?"

"Excuse me…?"

"This would be assuming Clay Palmer agrees to continuing his therapy with you, of course. But he appears to place a great deal of trust in you — a trust that he doesn't grant indiscriminately."

Ryker leaned forward, elbows on the conference table; she caught a clashing whiff of deodorant soap and cologne. "It puts you in an invaluable position to help gain more understanding of what Helverson's syndrome is. And help him at the same time."

She blinked. Blinked again. *I wanted to know where I was going with this…?*

I just got the chance to find out.

PART TWO/CORROSION

A devil, a born devil, on whose nature
Nurture can never stick
— William Shakespeare,
The Tempest

Eleven

The screaming man was really beginning to get on Valentine's nerves.

It wasn't that the sound of pain bothered him; rather, the simple fact was that it was *distracting*. There were times, it seemed, when all the world conspired to keep a man from ten minutes of peace just to go through his mail.

Valentine scowled at Teddy. "Would you *listen* to this pussy? Where'd you stick this guy, anyway?"

"Just the ear is all." Teddy was nothing if not obedient and loyal, assets that made it worth putting up with the mysterious way in which he always smelled fresh from a breakfast heavy on bacon. "Listen, Patrick? We'll have everything wrapped up in time to get to the Bruins game tonight, won't we?"

"Yeah, yeah, yeah, center ice, if you're lucky, you'll catch a puck in the teeth."

Valentine took the stack of two days' worth of mail brought from home — ignored during this round of deal making gone horribly sour — and slapped it back onto the driver's seat through the open window of his car. He stepped away from the door and stretched; autumn in the Massachusetts countryside, there was really no place he would rather be. The pulse and throb of Boston was left behind — he could *breathe* up here, could take refuge among the trees and listen to the icy wind in the last of their leaves. In the city, wind was just that: wind. Up here it was a voice that all predators heeded, and all prey feared, for on it was borne the scent of hunger.

Valentine motioned Teddy to follow and they began to walk up the gentle slope of the drive, toward the barn. It was more than merely old, with low foundation walls of stone, and the upper wooden remainder had not seen a paintbrush in his lifetime. The barn sat in the center of his property in Essex County; the nearest neighbors were a mile distant, and if they were outdoors, it would only be chance if the shimmer of a cry of misery floated

to them on the wind. They would wonder if wind was all the sound was, and go back to work.

"'A criminal is frequently not equal to his deed: he makes it smaller and slanders it.' Nietzsche said that." Valentine nodded and drew his longcoat tighter against the wind as husks of dead leaves crunched underfoot. He pointed toward the mouth of the barn as it resounded with a fresh warble of pain. "One more exhibition of living proof."

They entered the barn, shut the side door after them.

They walked past a small cluster of pens into the main clearing, dirt-floored beneath peaks and rafters where birds built nests and paid no heed to what transpired below. A scent of age clung to the air. No more horses, nor cows, nor other animals of the herd, just the smell of time.

The other three men were already inside. Two of them nodded at Valentine while standing a little straighter, and one of those still held a hammer. The third remained where he was, kneeling on the floor with hands wired behind his back, and his left ear nailed to one of the heavier posts.

"Hello, Shay," Valentine said. "Don't get up."

He was answered with a little yelp, and could see one eye widen, roving in search of his voice. Valentine stepped around him, knelt to bring them face-to-face. A few smears of blood trailed down Shay Cavanaugh's cheek.

"We can work this out, can't we? *Can't we?*" Begging already, and Cavanaugh's unruly black hair, crow's hair, looked electric in his pain.

Valentine grabbed a sweaty fistful and gave the entire head a fierce shaking, side-to-side — *no no no* — and the man screeched with every tug of ear against nail.

"It's gone a little far for that, Shay. Put yourself in my place. And when's the last time you let a hostage cut a bargain with *you*?" Valentine shook his head at the glisten of tears in the man's blue eyes; here was a sorry sight. "Listen to you, you're a disgrace to your cause. Forgotten Long Kesh, have you? Doesn't the memory of Bobby Sands do anything for you anymore? If somebody's going to try to rip me off, I'd just as soon it be a Muslim. Give me somebody from Abu Nidal's group. Spend all day pounding nails into one of those sons of bitches, and the only thing you'll hear is him cursing your entire family."

He shook his head again, and stepped away to take a coffee can from one of his men. A paintbrush with a two-inch width jutted against its rim, and Valentine stirred lazily on his way back, sniffed the heady fumes.

Shay Cavanaugh, the transatlantic point man for a breakaway cell from the Provisional IRA, had genuinely surprised him. A month ago Valentine had met with him in the back of a Chelsea pub to arrange the sale and dockside delivery of, among other sundry ordnance, several Heckler & Koch .308 assault rifles, a dozen drum-fed laser-sighted American 180s, several Ruger Mini-14s, and three cases of Semtex plastic explosive. The financing had been solid, had come from a few of the Manhattan Westies and some remnants of the old Emerald Society that Valentine knew were sympathetic to the rogue elements splitting from the traditional army. So what went wrong? Maybe Cavanaugh and his fellow travelers thought they could get away with both the weapons *and* the cash.

Last night, at the transfer drop in a warehouse along the docks of Gloucester harbor, Cavanaugh's people had turned greedy, treacherous, then bloodthirsty. Four of Valentine's freelancers were dead of head wounds. Others had been outside, a precautionary measure, and, for once, required.

The first time anyone had ever tried to blatantly rip him off and it had to be a countryman. They had gotten it all back, but then there was that small matter of disrespect.

Valentine squatted before the kneeling Cavanaugh and swirled the coffee can, wafted kerosene fumes to the man's nostrils like a chef teasing someone with the scent of his most savory meal.

How old was Shay, anyway? Thirty, thirty-five, around there. Valentine knew that, ten or fifteen years ago, he himself might have done just the same. Might even have tested his luck and skill for no better reason than to see if he could have gotten away with it, not really caring one way or another in the end. Though he would have had a better excuse than Shay Cavanaugh.

He listened to the last shreds of dignity come stammering from the man's bruised mouth, all *please* and *don't* and failed persuasion. For a moment, a fresh seizure clouded thoughts and gripped muscles and made him itch to inflict punishments more savage still, and Valentine simply could not think straight.

Down with you, he told it, *down with you, I'm better than that…*

He breathed deeply, and the kerosene made his head swim.

And so Valentine began to paint.

He slathered kerosene along the heavy post, from the ground up to Cavanaugh's perforated ear. It would be cold, surely, having sat in this barn all through an early November night; cold and stinging on the perforated ear. More and more he added, letting it soak into the wood while tears flowed just as freely.

"I've got a question for you, Shay…"

Valentine flicked the brush clean, returned it to a waiting hand.

"You tried to rip me off. You killed four people who worked for me…"

From the can he poured a thin trail from the base of the post to a larger puddle five feet away, out of reach of a wildly swinging hand.

"But I'm not going to ask you why. Nothing you could say about that would much interest me…"

Tossing the empty can aside.

"No, what I really want to know is: How steady is your hand?"

From Teddy he accepted a heavy pair of cutters and stepped behind Cavanaugh to snip through the wire binding his wrists; gave them back as Cavanaugh pulled his hands around and began to massage the raw chafing burns glistening with blood blisters.

Valentine tossed a single-edged razor blade onto the dirt and waited until Cavanaugh picked it up, staring at it with a mute and terrible comprehension. There was always that silence, the silence that transcended circumstance. The silence of *knowing* — "If you're steady, you can cut around the nail head and save most of your ear" — followed by the worst cries of all.

Kneeling again, taking no pleasure in this, just as he felt no remorse, Valentine lowered a lighter to his end of the kerosene's liquid fuse. "Outside, a few minutes ago, I quoted Nietzsche, but here's one for your benefit: 'Whoever rejoices on the very stake triumphs not over pain, but at the absence of pain that he had expected.' So rejoice, Shay. I could've made it a lot worse for you."

And he set flame to the trail.

Valentine had already walked out the door, was halfway to the car on this crisp and sunny November afternoon, before he heard the sound of

gunshots finishing the job. These would attract no more attention than a faint, faraway cry. They were sporting men. They loved and appreciated fine weaponry. They shot targets and test-fired guns here all the time.

"So how much you got riding on the Bruins tonight?" he asked Teddy a few minutes later.

"Double or nothing on what I was down last week." He hunched his big sloping shoulders.

Valentine conked him on the side of the skull. "Happy just to call it even, after all that? Ought to have your head examined."

They rolled away with Teddy behind the wheel of his car for the drive back down to Boston, and Valentine resumed shuffling through his stack of mail. People went to an awful lot of trouble to send an awful lot of nothing. Except for one, which he tore into as soon as he noticed the return address.

He hurriedly read the hand-scribbled cover letter, devoured the attached pages. Scanned photocopies of information that had been sent by fax. Lovingly crushed them like roses to his chest as he stared out the window at a passing countryside that seemed very far removed.

"They found another," he said, in reverence, in awe, in gratitude. "Clay Palmer, his name. Hmm. If I have to, I'll play *this* one as carefully as a prize marlin."

"And land him by when?" Teddy asked.

"Valentine's Day, when else? This time it'll work out. I can feel it. I'll have my legacy."

Patrick Valentine leaned back against the seat, and the look that settled over his face — those wary eyes, those contoured cheekbones and jawline that seemed to sweep around to either side of his streamlined skull — was a look very close to serenity.

Twelve

They left Tempe at the end of the week, the first weekend in November, Adrienne's car packed modestly considering her plans for an indefinite stay, ample room up front for herself and Clay. He had passed Friday night at her house without incident, so they could get started all the earlier, before dawn.

Northeast into the sunrise, the road soon blazed with desert fire, while at its other end beckoned mountains that would outlast them and their every hope and dream and granule of dust in death — gods of rock, the face of nature's indifference.

"As long as you can avoid it," Clay said, "could you not take the interstate? I hate the interstate."

"I'll try," she said. An atlas lay curled and wedged in the gap between their seats. Eight hundred miles. She had sworn to herself that she would do her best to avoid any conversation that resembled session work. In the car, it could be too much confined to too small an area, too pressurized.

Still, this seemed benign enough.

"What's wrong with the interstate?"

"I didn't touch an interstate after I left Denver." He stared ahead toward the corona of the rising sun. "I came on secondary roads. They're more interesting. Something about them seems true. If you keep off the interstates, you tend to see the people who travel for its own sake."

Gently, slowly, Clay was squeezing a rubber ball, therapy for muscles long unused. In the hospital he had seemed to relax after she'd told him that no one would challenge his discharge. She had been able to talk him into waiting a couple of days so he could leave with hands unburdened.

Just to see his hands at all seemed foreign, as if he should have remained in those twin casts forever. Both hands and lower arms had that unnaturally pale, pasty quality that skin sometimes takes on beneath a cast. His hands themselves, now emerged like chrysalids, shone with the angry red of new scars from the compound fractures.

Hands were so very vital, so telling of a person and the life led. And here now were Clay's, new to her, some facet of him once concealed, now revealed. She could glance at them — squeezing the ball, thumbing through the atlas, at rest — and wonder things she'd not considered before: They had known brutality, but had they ever known tenderness? He claimed to dislike being touched, but did he use them to caress, or stroke, or bring pleasure to someone else? Were they *ever* held, fondled, kissed? Such simple acts, but those who were denied them must be terribly lonely.

So much ground they had yet to cover.

"You never told me you were a lesbian," he said, miles later.

Adrienne had been waiting for that, in one form or another. "I never saw it as being relevant." She did not bother correcting him: *You're half-right, at least, just caught me on that side of the pendulum's arc.* If it served to discourage any transference of misdirected sexuality, all the better. "That's not suddenly going to be a problem, is it?"

"No. It was just a surprise. You know the way we fill in the blanks for people we don't know much about, and imagine things." He tired of squeezing the ball and took to tossing it, catching it, one-handed, over and over. "I noticed you never wore a ring, but I pictured you … I don't know … trading off sleepovers with some businessman, somebody like that. Not another doctor. I don't think you could stand another doctor."

Patients. Sometimes they could pick up the damnedest things.

"But it was good to be surprised," he went on, still tossing, catching. "Things like that remind me not to take anything for granted. Is this bugging you?" Holding up the ball, suddenly.

"A little."

Clay went back to squeezing. "It's easy to see why you were attracted to Sarah. It's like big parts of each of you are things the other isn't."

She weighed this a moment. Last night Clay had spent little time in actual conversation with them, quiet and withdrawn mostly, spending at least an hour sitting in the gathering darkness on the patio, alone, watching night seize the backyard. Still, it would have taken little observation, she supposed, to decide who was the extrovert and who the introvert, who made sure the bills were paid on time and who planned the parties.

They might have been friends, Clay and Sarah, under other circumstances, or at least as close to friends as he thought he could be.

Adrienne knew it, just knew they shared elements of a common core, had at one point watched them briefly converse and resonate like both prongs of a tuning fork. He had already spent a couple of minutes enchanted by the rainstick, then set it aside while wandering over to a bookcase filled predominantly with Sarah's titles, mostly anthropology texts and compendiums of multicultural mythic beliefs and the like. He scanned the spines, finally removing one from her small collection of art books.

"Salvador Dali, you like him?" he asked.

"Oh, are you kidding?" Sarah said. "He's only about my favorite twentieth-century artist. Adrienne and I were in Florida last year, and for two days I was inconsolable until we got over to St. Petersburg to the Dali Museum."

Watching from the kitchen, Adrienne caught the brief and uneasy hesitation with which Clay opened the book, flipped through pages. Close as Sarah was, it could never have escaped her.

"What, you don't like him?" she asked, looking that way she sometimes did, as if she'd be crushed if the answer was no.

"That's not it." Replacing the book, bruised brow furrowing beneath its bandage. "He hits too close to the bone sometimes. I … there are nights I have dreams like this. A lot, really. Some of those pieces, they're like home movies."

Sarah looked enthralled, respectful. "Some people take drugs to see that clearly and make those leaps of connection, and don't even get close."

Clay nodded, then looked at Adrienne in the kitchen doorway. "And some people prescribe drugs to make it stop."

Sarah looked at Adrienne, too, and burst into laughter, clapping a companionable hand against Clay's upper arm — he didn't flinch, Adrienne noticed — Sarah's unexpected and sincere delight even bringing a smile from him. The two of them, just standing there sharing what felt even worse than a private joke. *Am I reading this right?* she'd thought. *They just met and they're ganging up on me?* Turning away, finally, momentarily petulant and grumbling something about Dali being the Liberace of modern art.

Or was it just an irrational twinge of jealousy, made even more confusing by her not knowing which of the pair of them had caused it?

Regardless, it had passed.

Behind the wheel, sun now higher and yellow, lifted from the fiery red desert bath of its rising, Adrienne gripped harder and tuned in the highway. In retrospect, how pointless that small flare of anger now seemed. Despite the virulence of the yearnings that had driven him south to begin with, Clay had instinctively been right about one thing:

The road could heal.

It rolled on, grinding morning and afternoon and evening into dust that was taken by the wind. The land northeast was no less barren than the desert, just barren in a different way, brown hillsides dotted with pines. They climbed from the low Arizona altitudes into the higher reaches of mountain country, and the temperature must have slid more than thirty degrees. Denver often had its first snowfall by this time of year.

But the freeways and streets were clear and dry when they reached them that night. Clay directed her through the urban maze and the atlas was forgotten. Many more miles and her nerves would have whined like the highway beneath her tires. Earlier she had accepted his offer to share the driving; without his help she doubted they could have made it in one day's haul. She had taken care to consult the maps as to when they traded, to make sure he wouldn't be driving in cities. As long as he was on the open road, the danger seemed minimal that a stranger’s carelessness would shove him into blind rage and mechanized retribution.

The neighborhood to which he directed her seemed, so far as she could discern with her directional sense dulled by hours of monotony, close to the heart of the city. Houses built tall, decades ago, three stories to accommodate all the offspring of families vast and prodigious, when big families were the norm in a younger city and a younger nation. They would be lonelier dwellings now, interiors gutted and rearranged and walled off into isolated compartments for one or two, who might never even know the names of those living beneath the same roof. The walls would no longer recognize the sound of laughter from sprawling holiday gatherings, and the music that followed family feasts would only be an echo lodged in some aged rafter.

Adrienne parked at the curb, idling, headlights shining upon a tree just before the car, one of a blockful whose stark branches scraped at the neighborhood's sky, defiant and gnarled like the fists of gods who had been forgotten to death.

"What next?" whispered Clay.

"You go in, you take a hot shower, and you sleep in your own bed for a change."

"Right." He looked unconvinced, turned in his seat and facing her but half of him thrown into shadow. "That's not what I mean."

"I know."

It'll be all right, she wanted to soothe him. Something about him in this moment made her want to push aside all formality of the therapist-patient relationship — or was it now researcher-subject? — and reassure him as a friend.

"We keep going," she finally said.

"You're in my world now." He spoke as if regretting the fact. "I'm not in yours. It could make a difference."

"I'll try to find a neutral corner."

A thin smile touched the half of his mouth she could see, and while he said nothing she could almost hear him anyway, what he must have been thinking: *There is no such thing as neutrality. We just fool ourselves into thinking some regions are immune to our influence.*

"You're going to need some time to settle back in and readjust to being home. And I don't want to push you. But we need to decide on a day for me to call you and see when we should start our sessions again."

"Just give me the rest of the weekend, that's all I should need. Try me Monday afternoon." He laughed mockingly. "I guess I still have a phone."

"I can find my way back if you don't."

He nodded. "There's … someone … she's used to this kind of shit out of me. She probably came by and brought in my mail. If I'm lucky maybe she opened the bills."

It was the first real indication of a woman in his life. In therapy he had been evasive around the issue, more comfortable discussing past relationships than those of the present.

"What's her name?"

"Erin."

"I think I should hear more about Erin sometime soon."

"Why stop there? You'll probably meet her before long." He grabbed the rubber ball, bounced it once off the windshield and caught it. "My hands ache." Pocketing the ball in his jacket. "I'm going now."

After watching him recede up the walk, between a gauntlet of shabby hedges, to let himself into the house, Adrienne sat for a couple of minutes, until a light winked on in a third-floor window. She caught sight of his silhouette framed beneath a peaked eave, leaning there as he stared out into the night and the city, from his cage or his refuge, whatever home had now become.

Only when she saw a curtain glide before the window did she drive away.

*

Adrienne backtracked, having noted on the drive to Clay's, the hotels along the way. Saturday night, alone in a strange city, at the tail end of 800 miles, she was not about to be finicky.

She checked in with one bag of essentials to get her through the night, leaving the car in the hotel's parking garage, where she hoped it would be less likely to be broken into. Her gold card was deposit enough for an indefinite few days until she could arrange for something more permanent. She would be routing the bill to Arizona Associated Labs for reimbursement anyway.

Exactly what her hospital was getting out of the arrangement had not been made clear, but the lab must have made a persuasive offer to Ferris Mendenhall and his overseeing administrator. The hospital was essentially loaning her out as a freelance consultant, with AAL picking up her salary and supplying a staff psychologist to pick up the slack left by her absence. As well, AAL had agreed to cover her housing expenses, and then, so long as they were happy with her results, there was the possibility of a bonus once she had completed her evaluations and observations of Clay in his regular environment. Not surprisingly, treatment was the lowest priority on their agenda, something for her discretion.

The question of where this sudden influx of money was coming from, precisely, Adrienne had not heard asked, but she was assuming that AAL would be cannibalizing it from other projects that had already been funded. Diversion of funds was an everyday occurrence in many scientific communities. Where budget lines were loosely defined, there was a lot of flexibility in how they were used, or abused.

The ultimate irony: She had gotten her grant after all, with the blessings of Ward Five.

She was settled into the hotel room by midnight, filling the tub for a steaming bath to soak away road sweat, road nerves, the late-night blues of being too far away from the one she loved. Never would a bed seem any bigger and more desolate than tonight. The TV played softly, a sad companion.

While the faucet gushed water, she phoned and Sarah answered. *Here I am, here's my number, I miss you already, and even though I don't want to bring it up, I'm sorry if I acted like a bitch last night because I felt you and Clay were conspiring to judge me for what I do.*

"When are you going to start hunting down someplace real to live, then?" Sarah asked.

"As early as possible." Adrienne peeled away her socks, threw them toward her small suitcase, and curled her legs beneath her on the bed. She had planned on checking into the availability of condominiums for rent, with everything furnished.

"You know," said Sarah, "I got to thinking today, with the kind of schedule I've been keeping lately, I could join you, you know. I mean, that is, if you'd want me underfoot all the time — "

Want her? *Want her?*

" — bailing me out of jail every other night, maybe, am I talking myself out of this?"

Adrienne clutched the phone with both hands and shut her eyes and smiled, as if prayers she didn't even know she'd prayed had been answered. "How soon can you make it?"

Thirteen

Home again, such as it was — coming back, he felt as if he were an intruder. At any moment, someone might lunge from around a corner and shoot him. Pacing the floor, everything here unsettled, charged with menace until it recognized him and left him alone. His apartment was like a forgetful guard dog whose trust he had to win all over again.

It's just me, it's just me, it's just me —

Too long away, he would have to burn his renewed essence into the place before it became his once more.

Two rooms and a bath on the top floor, these were his quarters. Beneath a low roof, the place had a mild claustrophobic feeling; two feet from the ceiling, the walls angled inward, closing off space that was rightfully his. It needed airing, all of it, from the stale funk of the bedroom to the refrigerator and its miasma of things gone bad.

On a small dining table that demarked the kitchenette from the rest of the living room, Clay found a small accumulation of mail. He received little anyway, never any letters because he had no one to write to; junk, mostly — his name was worth more to strangers, so long as they thought they might get something out of him. A few past-due rent notices that must have been taped to his door had been brought in. From the phone and power companies nothing but empty envelopes, along with a hastily scribbled note: *I took care of these so you wouldn't get shut off and you owe me. You're on your own for the rent, I can't cover everything. WHERE ARE YOU, YOU SHIT?*

No name, but Erin's handwriting. How many times had she been up here? Walking through each room, the place vulnerable during an absence more prolonged than he could ever have anticipated. She couldn't help but leave things behind, smells and hairs and shed skin cells, little markings of territorial encroachment. Should he piss on the walls now, in reclamation? There was no reason to feel this way but he did; then again, how comforting to realize she cared that much.

If it was a problem, why had he given her a key in the first place? *Here, check on me if I turn up silent, maybe I'll be in this chair with a bullet in my head* — was that it? No, it wasn't. There had been times when suicide was tempting, but mostly he'd felt he would sooner kill the rest of the world.

Although according to Adrienne, that would probably turn out to be just another means of suicide, slower perhaps, just waiting, hoping, for that inevitable faster gun to come along and end it for him. He *must* need Adrienne — he was beginning to think like her, hearing the way she would say things in pointing out what should be obvious to him but never was.

And he wondered if he wasn't cooperating with this continued examination into the clockwork of his being to find out not what he was made of, but rather how *she* handled it. Both of them had been pushed nose-to-nose with the unknown, although at least he knew what it was like to live with himself for twenty-five years. If his more outré elements, less understood than simply sensed, turned out to be due to a chromosomal glitch, then that might explain a lot. Although to him this glitch wasn't science, it was survival. And not necessarily his own.

Just teach me how to stop before I kill someone…

There was nothing to unpack, nothing to eat, nothing to do, so Clay left the television playing to nonstop news of the world beyond, crawled into sheets that needed washing two months ago, and decided to sleep until the last eight hundred miles were leached from his system.

*

He was aware of her in the doorway before he really awoke and saw her. Footsteps on creaking floors and a voice lingering in the bedroom doorway; the grind of a tiny motor like a metal whisper.

"And this is an asshole, you can tell by the way he just lies there. They're everywhere, but this one's a bigger asshole than most, and it's not often you find them this defenseless."

She came in just as he was focusing, skirting the bed in a shuffling half circle, legs and arms and a body and a video camera leering in.

Sudden flash: strapped into bed — no, wait, he could move — and they had sent in clones of people from his personal life to invade even his sleep chamber, to record every moment; perhaps he slept differently than

normal people. No observable behavior was too minute to tweeze away from his life, to dissect and examine through a lens.

No — Erin. Only Erin.

She halted her impromptu documentary and lowered the camera to her side, looking at him as if not trusting that he was really there. Beneath a slouch hat, bottle-blond again — when he'd left, her hair had been its normal brown — and the thinner kind of thin she got when not eating much. Hollow-cheeked, with a full-lipped mouth whose corners tended to turn down, and blue eyes that naturally seemed to ache from some recent wound.

"So where've you *been*?"

"A psychiatric ward."

She stared, lips and tongue frozen on the edge of sly retort, and it looked as if the camera was about ready to swing up and resume documentation. Then her shoulders sagged. "You're not kidding, are you? They really did it to you this time. They really did it, didn't they?" Erin spun in a slow circle, shaking her head, then sat on the edge of the bed. "Here?"

Clay shook his head, thick inside, webbed with sludge. "Arizona. Tempe."

Normal people would have asked what he was doing there, would have taken every answer as a clue to pry another question out of their disbelief, backtracking one step at a time. Erin would not. Something about her took it as a matter of course that it was perfectly natural that he should end up in Arizona, while his car remained at the curb for the entire trip. It made for a welcome kind of shorthand.

"What happened to your forehead?" She pointed at the bandage, the yellowing bruise creeping beyond its edges, the ghost of a fading black eye. "Did you get that in a fight?"

"With myself." A soft huff. "I had a nightmare, and … you know how I can get." Erin found it hard to sleep with him unless he was so saturated with chemicals that he did not dream; almost anyone would. "I had a cast on when it happened."

"A cast." She looked him over more closely, lingering across his knuckles, the backs of his pale hands. The ugly fresh scars that slashed and curled their way over the healed bones. "I guess that explains the Frankenstein look."

So he decided, why not, fill her in on the more important details. Nothing surprised her anymore, if it ever had, and she did not judge. He told her about the initial journey, the fight; told her about Ward Five and Adrienne. He left the more recent developments alone, and Erin never interrupted. She videotaped, though, sitting opposite him at the end of the bed with her camera steadied on both knees, and he was used to this by now. Sometimes it was her way of listening.

"They tell you anything this time that you didn't already know?" she asked, just a voice behind a camera, not expecting him to say yes — it was apparent in every word. *Oh, just business as usual for Clay, they just kept him a little longer for a change.*

"Yeah," and he looked into the camera eye, Erin hidden, patient, trying to find the perfect frame in which to fit him, an angle to capture his essence in all its contradictions, or take what was there and banish it, leaving him neither brute nor human. He exhaled, long and heavy, stale morning breath — or was it afternoon by now? "I'll tell you later."

She lowered the camera, mildly disappointed, mildly chiding, mildly amused. "You're boring."

"I'm tired."

Erin reversed ends and stretched out on the bed alongside him, thin rack of bones and curves and layers of clothing still chilled from outside. He looked to the window, saw that it was trying to rain, spatters striking glass in hushed counterpoint to the constant murmur of CNN in the living room. Bare branches swatted helpless and angry in gusts of wind. The sky was gray as iron, cold looking, and if it could care about anything at all it would surely be hostile.

"How's everybody else?" he asked.

"The same, I guess. I think you scared Graham. You've never been gone this long, have you? I didn't think so. After a while he just wouldn't talk at all about you being gone. Uncle Twitch was trying to take bets on when you'd show up again."

"Did anybody take him up on it?"

"Just Nina. But that doesn't really count, keeping it between the two of them like that. So, no takers."

"Not even you?"

She rolled her head over, now face-to-face, glaring with no-nonsense eyes. "I was already out sixty-odd bucks for your bills, what do I need to lose more for?"

"You'll get it back."

She glared a little fiercer, yet seemed to have softened somehow, lightly touching her forehead to his; the swelling beneath the bandage throbbed. "You *could* thank me, at least."

Erin was right. He knew he was lax when it came to certain words, certain phrases. It wasn't that he did not know gratitude; it was just that it could leave you so indebted.

"Thank you," he tried anyway, and found it did not kill him.

It was enough. Erin expected little, planned for no future, took everything as it came along — a supremely pragmatic outlook in dealing with him. He was fully aware that most women, assuming they could have tolerated him any length of time at all, would now be ready to choke him, and would not necessarily be out of line.

It was neither love nor commitment here, on any conventional scale; more a drawing together, as members of some small pack who watched each other's backs, and took care of cauterizing the wounds whenever the need arose. False conceits such as monogamy and exclusivity were of little use. Erin fucked him and she fucked Graham, both on a regular basis, and of the two, it was Graham's heart that seemed to bleed at times over that to which he could never lay sole claim.

But no one had ever accused Graham of being too pragmatic; no one had ever accused Erin of *not* being so. Fucking was also a part of her job description, or at least pretending to. Her face and body were treated well by cameras, and there were a few connected photographers in the area that she knew. She posed with other models for layouts in some of the harder skin magazines on the stands, and the even rawer material available by mail only, or racks in the hard-core shops. She had said she didn't even consider the other models to be sex partners, just other bodies, other props; while there was excitation and insertion high and low, not often was there actual climax, and even less so for her than for the male models.

All in all, to Clay it served as no threat. Once or twice, at least, it was probably a good thing to have a relationship in which you knew you were just one more inserter on the assembly line.

She lay with him through the afternoon, warm company with whom to weather out the worsening assault of chilly rain at the window, and the continuous barrage of news from television in the next room. Daylight waxed and daylight waned, just that, just light; never a sun. She wanted to call the others, Graham and Twitch and Nina, let them know he had returned in one piece, but he said no, not today — what if they wanted to come over already? He had disappeared almost two months ago. The news would keep until tomorrow.

He showered when the road-worn feel of his skin drove him out of bed, for a time huddling on the slick and stained porcelain as water beat down upon his fetal body. A hot rain, but he shivered as if it were the cold deluge beyond the windows. Strange moments indeed: home again, setting his own schedule; in control of his life once more, if he didn't count the lithium. Although that was taking much for granted, and assuming he'd been in control to begin with. Maybe he never had been, and free will was the cruelest of illusions; every step he'd taken and decision that had seemed arbitrary might have been as predictable, to anyone who knew those inscriptions of nucleic acid, as C following B following A. A savvy fortune-teller of the genetic age might be able to divide his cranial lobes and tell all from simple inspection: Kick a man in the teeth even after he has been justly conquered? *There, in that whorl of brain tissue.* Carve a scar on his own arm? *There, there, in that fissure…*

For you are not like others
not like others
not like others

He left the bathroom, wrapped in a towel, his damp hair combed back, slick and contoured to his head. Erin was standing at a window off the kitchenette, watching sluggish traffic on the street, when he came up behind her.

"Stitches, too," she said upon turning to see what the bandage had been covering earlier, fingering the knotty black line over his eye. Starting to laugh, then, supple mouth breaking into a smile beautiful in its sadness. "You look like they gave you a lobotomy."

"It might be the only way to fix things," he said, half-joking, and despite the serious half he realized he was almost happy like this. The two of them standing here, it could be mistaken for something normal … rainy

Sunday afternoon, what do we do now? Someone peering in from the other side of the glass might even get the impression they were in love.

"They found something genuinely wrong with me," he began, keeping his earlier promise, and he told her. It came surprisingly easy; it sounded like such a joke. Sum it all up in a few brief sentences, and what did it make him, if not a punch line to some evolutionary jest? Somewhere even now Darwin might be laughing.

Eye-to-eye, she did not blink as she held his bare shoulders, biting her lip. Better she ache there than within, right?

"You're so alone," she whispered, "you are *so* alone. Always have to do things your own fucking way, don't you?"

Clay did not know what to say to that, had no arguments, no evidence to the contrary. So he just watched her shake her head and roll her tongue inside her cheek until she sagged, resting her brow against his collarbone. One wandering hand debated where to alight, trailing from his arm to waist to leg, finally fumbling beneath the towel and cupping his genitals. He grew against her, and shut his eyes as soon as he felt a tiny trace of moisture against his chest. If she had shed a tear for him, it was nothing he wanted to know about, nothing he could *afford* to know about.

Erin took the lead in making the way to his bedroom, lay him down on the bed while whipping her own clothing aside: oversize black T-shirt, tight black leggings, black Doc Martens boots, flung into a pile like an exoskeleton. Her every rib was clearly defined, her shoulders as bony as a waif's, although for someone so skinny she was uncommonly large-breasted.

She straddled him and leaned forward along the length of his body, kissed his lips, but with his tongue seeking to probe deeper she pulled away — up, then, to his brow, where she settled her mouth over the stitches. The knot was still exquisitely tender and as sensitive as an erogenous zone. He could feel the tip of her tongue play across the needlework, then a faint teasing pressure from her teeth; strange game of trust, this — he did not wholly feel secure that she wouldn't bite down hard.

In the back of his mind he longed for a condom, but she would not want one. She played that game of roulette in her professional life; her personal was but an extension. It wasn't even so much that he worried about diseases as it was the risk of failure of her birth control pills. What a

horrible thing that would be. She could abort, but their child might truly be its father's, consumed by fierce survival instincts; it might fight the scraping and the suction, turn her womb into a battleground. He had always been averse to the idea of bringing a child into the world, even more so now that he knew he was wrong on a molecular level. A second generation might be more hideous still, like every parent's curse become prophecy fulfilled: *Just wait until you have a child of your own someday:* then *you'll see.*

He gambled again; parted her and entered unguarded, the fear a dark and shining facet of the thrill.

Erin shuddered upright, then bore down upon him with a face he had never seen in her still-life faux sensuality. She looked wounded, angry, capable of consuming him; then she doubled in on herself. She stretched back, back, reaching to the foot of the bed with long thin arms and bringing the video camera to her eye. Red light winking on; she flexed her hips, seeking a rhythm at last, and the frame would have a steady rolling flow.

Selfishly, he missed her hands on him, their rough urgency, and her eyes were gone, replaced by glass and plastic and metal, so he shut his own, and concentrated on trying to feel what he could, whatever he could. It really was better this way.

Fourteen

Early Monday morning, Adrienne began setting appointments to see condominiums for an indefinite rental. Her criteria were few but inflexible: The place would have to be fully furnished; it would ideally be within a mile or two of Clay's apartment, to facilitate contact; and it would need, if not a room, at least a corner or wall that she could rearrange to her liking into some semblance of a professional domain. Better for both her and Clay if they had a territory to help ease them away from the Tempe office to which they'd been accustomed.

She kept her first appointment later that same morning, with another for late afternoon, a third for Tuesday. After lunch, she whittled away a couple of hours going over notes and the Helverson's case studies.

Anything to put off taking the actual plunge? Maybe she *was* stalling. Once she picked up that phone and resumed contact with Clay, the pressure to perform would begin from all sides, with no one to fall back on. Her isolation had become a tangible essence, she was bathed in it. Even Sarah's eventual arrival — whenever that occurred — would be more tonic than cure.

She placed the call, imagining that Clay would not answer, that the number he'd given was a decoy and the apartment not even his; he would have given them all the slip as he straggled off to some other desert of scorched revelations. She would return south in failure and disgrace.

And when he picked up on the other end, she felt quite the irrationalist.

"How are you feeling?" she asked. "This isn't too early to call, after all, is it?"

"No, no. I'm fine. I've slept a lot, but I think I'm coming out of that today."

"How is it to be back home? Any feelings of dislocation?"

"A few," he said, a reluctant admittance. "Even though I didn't much care for it, I got used to a routine in that place and it's not in effect anymore. I keep expecting people to come in to look at me, and they don't."

"It's normal, trust me. Clay, Friday morning you woke up on Ward Five, the same as you had every morning for a month and a half. This is only Monday. If you still feel this way in a week, let me know. But I doubt you will."

"I don't miss them," he said. "And it's good to get back to an irregular meal schedule."

Adrienne had him grab a pen and paper and take down the hotel phone and her room number, told him she should be there until the end of the week, give or take a day. She didn't think they should wait for her relocation to resume sessions. Had he given any thought to a schedule he might like? Sundays and Wednesdays were good enough before, nothing wrong with them now, he said.

"Then I'll expect to see you day after tomorrow," she said.

"Listen, if you're interested … three or four people I know, they wanted to welcome me back tonight, at this place we go. If you want to come…"

Her immediate impulse was to decline. He was a patient; it was not a good idea to socialize with patients. Then she amended: He was far more than that, as her duties had for the first time been extended beyond therapy into field observation.

You're in my world now, he had told her. *I'm not in yours.*

"What kind of place are you talking about?"

Clay seemed to consider this for several moments, perplexed or at a loss, then asked, almost cheerfully, "Have you ever read Dante's *Inferno*?"

*

The Foundry, it was called. She had said she would try to make it by ten, after the others would have been there an hour or so, but decided it wasn't so bad to be fashionably late, however unwittingly.

She fought the urge to take a cab — better she learn to get around without a hired crutch. Circling the blocks in an area north of downtown to which Clay had directed her, where the buildings looked grained with decay, where storefronts and their roof lines defiantly stood despite advancing age, as if proud of fatigue and scars. Doorways and windows frequently wore faces of nailed plywood, never blank, bristling with bent-cornered flyers and thousands of staples, layers upon layers of each.

She parked, finally — perhaps the place she was looking for was invisible from a car — trying to walk these streets as if she belonged here, knew them by heart. At last she came upon a sigil: The Foundry, in black spray paint on raw brick, nearly invisible in the night, on the flank of a building just inside the mouth of an alley. An arrow pointed back. Not a place you would stumble upon by accident.

Descending to a doorway below street level, she paid the four-dollar cover to a boy with blond dreadlocks, greenish in a spill of light from within. Without checking her driver's license — how depressing, her youth must really be gone forever — he sealed a cheap vinyl bracelet around her wrist and she was on her way. The music was already rumbling out at her, louder with every step along a concrete corridor that felt thick underfoot, sticky, like an old theater's floor.

It took her into a low, cavernous asylum of a place — bedlam's basement — where heavy-gauge pipes ran riot along walls and the ceiling. Here and there some fetish dangled; mutilated baby dolls were popular, charred with a blowtorch or skewered by spikes or garroted with frayed wires, shining sightless eyes, invariably blue, wide with naiveté. A pair of projection screens unspooled a continual flood of imagery — one a horror film, the other what appeared to be a narrative-free video collage of everything from medical procedures to wartime-atrocity footage to factory machines disgorging glowing rivers of molten iron — but no soundtracks could be heard above the music. Much pandemonium on the dance floor, as heavy bass tones shuddered into bones and a caustic treble grinding rended equilibriums in a corrosive symphony of deconstruction.

Seating was confined along the walls, discarded cathedral pews and tables and chairs imprisoned in alcoves behind chain link fencing. It was in one of these that she found them, Clay her one and only clue. He stood when he saw her, laughed at the look on her face.

"Toto," he said, "I don't think we're in Kansas anymore."

"I'm more used to coffeehouses at home." An idiot confession. A college town, surely Tempe had someplace like this, but she had no idea where to find it.

Three others sat at the table, eyes neither welcoming nor rejecting her, more curious than anything. They would surely know what she was, if not every detail as to why she was here. She guessed that she was older than

most by eight or ten years, maybe more in the case of the thin blonde to Clay's left, but it did nothing to alleviate the sense of intimidation. The world often aged people by pain rather than by years, and if their families had been anything like Clay's, she could well have walked in upon a conclave of ancients with deceptively young faces.

She sat, and Clay made cursory introductions. The thin blonde to his left was Erin. At the end of the table was Graham, another stick figure lost inside a T-shirt — didn't these people *eat*? — who met her eyes briefly, then averted as he took a draw from a cigarette pluming with some rank herbal smell.

"Clay's mentioned your paintings," Adrienne said. "I'd like to see your work sometime."

Graham nodded, and with one bony, large-knuckled hand waved out toward the dance floor, the ceiling.

"The dolls?" she guessed.

He nodded again. "They aren't supposed to be anything, I was just bored one night."

"But the material just happened to be sitting around," this from the chunky young woman across the table, with thick, red, wavy hair, an obvious dye job, gathered to one side in a kind of gypsy scarf. Clay introduced her as Nina.

"Look close now, she'll probably look completely different next week," he added as a caveat.

"Piss off," Nina told him, not unkindly.

"I'm just letting her know you keep a frequent metamorphosis schedule, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it." Turning to Adrienne, "Uncle Twitch works in the sound booth, maybe he'll be out later." Clay pointed across the dance floor, where brutal silhouettes collided under blue-purple lighting. A small structure appeared to cower in the far corner, behind another barricade of chain link fence, beneath lights and speakers.

"Would you tell me if you *did* think there was something wrong with it?" Nina asked.

"Yes," Clay said without hesitation.

She leaned forward to seize Adrienne's complete attention, as if it were suddenly very important to explain herself. She seemed to crave

intimacy and there was no way intimacy could be achieved with the volume of the music, with the exaggerated gestures required to compete.

"I just don't think anyone should limit herself to only one incarnation, that's all," she said, nail-bitten hands flailing in tight circles. "What if I like myself even better another way? How can I know unless I try it?"

"I understand." Adrienne tried to nod with reassurance. *Poor thing, she knows what I am and she's afraid I'm going to pick her apart right here at this table.* "I live with someone who's the same way about a lot of things. She has trouble making up her mind if it means excluding some other option."

Nina began to nod right along with her, wide pleasant face radiant with proxy kinship to a nameless stranger — *yes, that's it, exactly.*

"A few weeks ago she asked if it was her fault that everything looked so interesting. It stumped me."

"And by living with her, you mean…"

"We sleep in the same bed, if that's what you're getting at."

"That's cool," said Nina. "I tried sleeping with other women but it just didn't work for me. Hetero and hopeless, I guess."

Graham, his face high-cheekboned and oddly aristocratic, blew a dour gust of smoke. "I'm sure you can find a support group somewhere."

"Piss off," she told him.

Graham pushed black, tumbledown bangs from his eyes, flashed a look of impish mockery at Clay, then back to Nina. "I'm just letting her know you're a neurotic flake, I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it."

Nina drew back in indignation. "Graham, I hate to tell you this, but you're an asshole tonight."

Erin propped her chin on a fist, looking down at the table, and said, "A lot of that going around lately."

Nina had recovered quickly, leaning toward Graham with forces marshaled. "*Some* people think change is *healthy*. *Some* people" — a glance toward the sound booth — "find change sexually arousing. Every few weeks or so, Twitch gets to ravage a new woman and we *don't* have to worry about disease entering the picture."

Erin looked up, interest renewed. "This is a good time to ask something I've always wondered. What if Twitch likes ravaging one of the earlier women better?"

"Well *you* can just piss off too," said Nina, and now she really was beginning to get agitated.

"What, what did *I* say?" Erin cried. "It's a valid question."

"Well, it doesn't deserve an answer."

Graham nudged Erin's shoulder. "It's already happened," he declared, very sure of himself, and did not give Nina a chance to respond. "Which one was it, let me guess: the dominatrix? Or was it the post-Woodstock earth-mother with the Birkenstocks?" A shrewd smile, a carnivore's smile. "Which one moaned louder?"

"Graham — "

"And does he ever breathe a sigh of relief when one's gone?"

Nina drew back in her chair, seeming to shield herself behind the scattering of empty bottles, bleeding from unseen slices. Eyes that moments ago had shone brightly were now dismal and frantic, without grounding. She looked to Clay but got nothing. To Adrienne it was like watching someone being poked with a stick, seeking support from an older brother, and finding only a turned back.

Save for Clay, she did not know these people, but could she sit there and let this happen? Say nothing? Would they even listen to her? She had stiffened in her chair, and before she could say a word, it was as if Clay knew precisely when to nudge her arm.

"Come on," he said, "let's go introduce you to Twitch."

Staring, torn, *I'm needed here —*

More insistent: "Come *on*," voice low and compelling even through the ratcheting music. She followed him out of the cage into greater light, denser sound, a disorienting assault. She pulled in closer to Clay, her mouth at his ear.

"You could have stopped that, couldn't you?"

"Probably," he shouted back.

"But you didn't."

"It'll stop anyway."

Why, you cold prick — it crossed her mind before she was able to filter it out. Objectivity had died without a whimper. What a plunge this was, ripped from the four safe walls that comprised her zone of efficiency in Tempe, set down where she wasn't even sure which rules had flipped. The dynamics of exchange were completely different here.

I am a fraud and I'm totally unqualified to be doing this. The sudden need for Sarah swept over her. Sarah would lead by example. Sarah would thrive here, would have immersed herself upon arrival. Sarah would take to them naturally because that's what Sarah *did*, and in that moment the only thing that terrified her more than Sarah deciding she should stay home after all, was if she came, and the rest of them, Clay especially, decided they had no use for Adrienne at all.

Clay in the lead, they weaved through the throng of long hair and shaved heads, leather and flannel, T-shirts and dark wraiths, all of them like members of allied tribes who had come together for noisy ritual, drawn by a summons they may not even have comprehended. They were *in here*, they were not *out there*, and it was enough.

He first led her to the bar, where she got a gin, and he some red-orange concoction in a plastic glass. A smart drink, he told her: quantum punch.

"Much alcohol at all, it just kills me," he said. "They say this has amino acids, it helps your brain." Taking a drink, then shrugging. "Probably just bullshit."

They circled the floor again, a slow path. On one screen, actors in latex demon makeup menaced a young woman with curved tools of butchery; on the other, a mad-eyed rhesus monkey secured by metal clamps shrieked without sound during the advanced stages of vivisection. She turned her eyes away, the symmetry obscene.

Clay halted at one point, tried to explain that Graham really didn't intend to be cruel to Nina; it just came out sometimes when he had been drinking. His own theory: Graham secretly envied her apparently effortless flexibility. He had his paintings and an occasional sculpture, but these were all he dared try, while Nina was essentially fearless. She constantly attempted to define her own niche, without much success at anything, but at least she tried it all. Painting had been an early experimental passion, but Graham had laughed off her vision and execution as immature, so into the closet it all went. Last year she had tried writing subversive children's literature, not disliking children but resenting them for their innocence, and had penned such twists on convention as *The Little Engine That Died* and *Little Red Riding Crop*, in which Red seduced the wolf and found him to be a closet submissive; but no one had cared to publish them. A few months

ago she'd tried her hand at designing greeting cards for people who hated holidays, hoping to market the idea of a series of Sylvia Plath Christmas cards, but had been denied the rights to reprint excerpts from the selected poems.

Meanwhile, Graham had his paintings, and did not even feel comfortable straying from the corroded iron realms he had forged for himself.

Of course not, thought Adrienne, *he's painting his own prison,* a hasty judgment considering she had only heard the works described and had barely even spoken to him; but instinct was often more correct than she gave it credit for.

"Nina," said Clay, "she'll probably outlast us all."

They worked their way around to the sound booth, and Clay rapped at a plastic window overlooking the dance floor, showed his face, then they moved around to a door that looked flimsy enough to withstand one kick, no more. After a moment it was unlocked, and they squeezed into the booth, at most four feet by eight. The volume dropped immediately; you could converse in here without throat strain.

A tall figure was hunched forward, feverishly loading music, a mad Frankenstein busying himself with digital technology. Even alone he would appear too cramped in the booth, the sort of guy whose elbows and knees seemed to have their own renegade senses of direction. A short sandy ponytail hung limp at the nape of his neck, and he wore a beard but no moustache. To Adrienne he looked like a young Amish man gone irrevocably astray.

"Charmed," he said flatly when introduced, and shook with a hand already burdened by a cassette. He missed not a beat and prattled on, ignoring Clay for the moment and talking only to her. "Look at these, would you?"

He forced upon her the cases from two compact discs and one tape, releases by artists she had never heard of: Godflesh, God's Girlfriend, the God Machine. Adrienne gave them back with a vacant smile, much like her own mother's when she had been handed some cryptic crayon drawing: *Oh yes, isn't* that *nice.*

"I come up with these thematic blocks, and nobody out there ever catches onto them." Uncle Twitch looked disconsolate. "No one recognizes

subtext anymore. I work among philistines."

Adrienne glanced at the two windows, long and narrow and overlooking the concrete dance floor like gunports in a fortress. Beneath them were makeshift shelves for the CD players, a tape deck, a turntable, a mixer, the amplifier. She looked for someplace safe to rest her glass but there was none.

"I'm sorry," she said. "Maybe there's no incentive to tell you."

Twitch looked at her, open-mouthed and perfectly still, then nodded sharply. He reached up to seize a microphone and lever it down before his face. Flipped a switch and his voice cut in over the music like that of an angry prophet: *"The first one of you ungrateful cocksuckers who can tell me what the last three tracks had in common gets a free rectal exam!"* He jammed the microphone back into place and crossed his arms. "There."

"Subtle," said Clay.

Cheers and jeers from the dance floor; from some unseen quarter most of a cup of draft beer came showering across one window, and Twitch cackled loudly. "*That* got 'em! Sometimes you just need to know you're not being taken for granted."

He settled, finally looked at Clay. Warmly, she noticed, a small smile creeping onto the corners of a mouth that looked given to smiling frequently, almost against its will.

"I'm glad you're back," he told Clay, lightly, though not without concern. For a moment Twitch looked as if he intended to hug him, then consciously forced it away, as if even an arm tossed about Clay's shoulders for a few seconds would be too much, either feared or unwanted. Worse, it appeared mutually understood.

Here they lingered, the booth calm and cool, a hurricane's eye in fragile isolation from the chaos just yards away. While Clay and Twitch conversed, she remained at one window, a staring face washed black and blue and purple, the colors of fresh bruises. She could watch with more removal than she could ever have summoned at one of the tables; out there a patron, in here an interloper who watched dancers that did not so much dance as spasm, less from celebration than the vaguest kind of rage. The music was well chosen here, the sound of a world grinding its children into grease to lubricate its machines. Here the defiant could stave off that fate awhile longer; or maybe they mocked it, or simply rehearsed the moment

when they too would be fed struggling into the maw, like their parents before them. Or perhaps they worshiped it instead, without even realizing; gods took many forms, and the new ones were no less thirsty for blood than the forgotten ancient deities; they just waited until it was spilled in newer ways.

Clay decided to leave the booth long enough to return to the bar, and she decided against following, risking the impression she was dogging his every step.

"He told us," said Twitch, soon.

"Excuse me?"

"About being a freak."

Adrienne turned from the window. "That's not the terminology I like to use."

"I think *he* prefers it."

"And I don't."

Twitch nodded with appeasement — not worth arguing about. At once she found something endearing in his clumsy way of trying to steer out of this.

"He can be so honest about himself, in the strangest ways," Twitch mused, hands moving restlessly over knobs and switches and sliders, as if they found comfort there. "Is it … is it dangerous for him?"

Adrienne sagged, hands in her pockets. "I can't answer that. I wouldn't if I could."

"He thinks it is. Isn't that all that matters?"

No, but that was most of it, so much so that there was no need to refute. Clay was back soon, spent a few more minutes in the booth before deciding to return to the table. She came along this time, eyes drawn to the reality screen in spite of herself, where a man sat placid and shaven-headed, eyes catatonic, while doctors probed into his opened skull; one cheek ticked as if jerked by a puppeteer.

At their table they found that Erin had left for the dance floor, while Nina sat holding a morosely stupefied Graham as he sagged against her side. His expression looked like something that someone had crumpled up and cast away. He might have been crying recently, or not; most certainly he was drunk beyond repair. And Nina, eyes full of pity, as if she was not sure what else she could feel … she held him, and kissed his forehead, and

brushed the hair from his eyes when it fell there. Whatever she whispered into his ear was lost to the greater din.

Clay nudged Adrienne’s foot to get her attention.

"Told you, you're not in Kansas anymore," he said, and drew out a chair and sat heavily upon it, to wait … until, she supposed, the night ended.

Fifteen

Quincy Market was one of Boston's main melting pots, and that was why Patrick Valentine loved it so. It was more than just the food, although that was incentive enough. Here, all the cuisines of the world converged, small counter stands packed along a gray stone hall that looked more suited to housing a wing of government. You could walk from end to end, side to side, slowly, taking time to breathe, to savor, and conduct a global tour via aromas alone.

Or you could sit and watch the passing humanity, and the world would come to you. He knew of no place else where he could see such diversity among those with whom he had to share the planet, and it always did him good to keep in touch this way, keep him mindful of why he was *what* he was.

Sometimes he indulged fervid old fantasies, imagining the break in the humdrum that he could bring to the herds who came to feed with firm belief that the day would be a day like all others. How many could he kill in, say, five minutes of forever? He was a man who knew weaponry, who had made it his business, and his hands seemed made to hold it. His fingers and palms fit machine-tooled steel as the hands of passionate men fit their lovers. With the compression of one index finger he could awaken them all from their walking comas, and bring home to them the truth of the world, and worlds beyond: All things tend toward entropy.

But not today; not ever. How he had managed to quell such impulses as a younger man remained elusive, but mystery augmented relief; surely some greater process had been at work to stay his trigger finger. Ignorant of his heritage then, and now wiser by extremes, he had a greater purpose, the best kind: one he had created for himself.

A Thursday afternoon; alone, then not. The man who joined Valentine at his table brought with him the scent of a shivering city and breath that smelled of cherry throat lozenges.

"Are you eating today?" Valentine asked him.

The man coughed into his fist and shook his head, eyes red and watery as he tried to smooth his graying, gale-blown hair. He owned, by many accounts, one of the finest minds in a city filled with exceptional minds, but publicly downplayed it well enough. Stanley Wyzkall may have been the director of applied research in MacNealy Biotech's genetics division, but it was possible that rumors were true: His wife was in charge of his wardrobe.

"Something to drink, then?" Valentine asked, and Wyzkall told him a hot coffee would be nice. He left to patronize a Greek vendor, souvlaki for himself and coffee for them both. When he returned he found a fat manila envelope waiting on his side of the table, and it was just like Christmas, six weeks early.

"Hello, hello," he said to the envelope, snatching it up. Papers spilled into his hand but gold dust could have been no more welcome. Medical profiles, psychological evaluations, MMPI results, subject's history … enough to keep him engrossed for hours.

"Quite the unique extended family you've grouped about yourself." Wyzkall honked his nose into a napkin before bringing the coffee to his lips, two-handed.

"And he actually consented to continued observation," said Valentine, still scanning pages. He then crushed them to his chest in the closest thing to glee he could feel. "Maybe there *is* a God."

"Mmm. Possibly. But defined by a keen sense of the absurd, wouldn't you say?"

"I wouldn't call it perfection." Valentine stuffed the papers back into the envelope, too much of a temptation — his lunch would grow cold.

"The attending psychologist — Rand is her name — has been in Denver since last weekend. She returned him there herself. She's agreed to file weekly progress reports with Arizona Associated Labs. Of course I'll have access to these. And this, mmm, this brings up the matter … the matter of — " He began to clear his throat harshly, at last popping another cherry lozenge and looking so reluctant that Valentine was tempted to just let him squirm.

"The matter of a weekly retainer?" he prompted.

Wyzkall appeared greatly relieved.

"How much?"

"Twenty-five hundred per week seems reasonable."

"Two thousand is the limit at which I'm prepared to keep from being *un*reasonable." He hunched forward, bringing his face closer to Wyzkall's, every sweeping curve of his skull glistening with intent. And his eyes, cunning eyes, flat eyes that spoke of pain for the sake of expediency, that simmered with the knowledge of families who should be protected from assassins unknown. There was no need to say another word.

Because you trust me and I trust you, ethically and legally and in our future goals we have each other by the balls, but you always keep that little flame of fear of me alive. Because you know what I am inside and there's always the remote chance I may explode in your face. You have dealt with a devil and he pays you well, but the devil can always, always, slip his leash.

"Two thousand will be sufficient."

Valentine settled back into his seat. He bluffed well but would never hurt Wyzkall. You did not hurt the goose that laid the golden eggs; although if you could scare it into shitting out a little extra gold now and then, so much the better.

"Drink your coffee, Stanley," he said, "and we'll decide the best way to launder in the new cash flow."

*

Theirs was a business relationship based on the two primary commodities in the modern world: money and information. Over the past four years, Valentine had paid $20,000 apiece for his own copy of the file on each identified Helverson's syndrome subject. He had an insatiable need to know the limits of the mutation that had marked his own chromosomes; the private sector lab for which Stanley Wyzkall served as research director had an equal need for monetary reserves.

MacNealy Biotech, in addition to its indigenous research projects, was one of numerous labs the world over involved in the Human Genome Project, the inner-space equivalent of landing the first man on the moon. Discussed in think tanks and on scientific symposia for years, and finally decided to be technologically feasible, the Project was launched in the fall of 1990 with the fifteen-year goal of mapping every strand of human DNA. Each of the three billion nucleotide base pairs, charted. Each chromosome identified, its function labeled.

The resource needs were staggering. Entire supercomputer data banks would have to be constructed to contain the sequenced information. New technologies needed refining to speed up the process of deciphering the protein codes. Human effort was estimated at upwards of 30,000 man-years of labor. And the financial requirements would be almost endless.

Patrick Valentine felt that, in some small way, he was doing his part. Stanley Wyzkall wanted none of the covertly allocated funds for himself, instead insisting they be directed, through foundations that existed only on paper, into MacNealy Biotech.

It all worked out well, and shaped direction in a life that had for its first forty years seemed to him to be absolutely without meaning.

Chicago-born, Chicago-bred, Patrick Valentine had grown up, if not the toughest boy in his surrounding neighborhoods, at least the fiercest. His furies knew no logic, they were just there, so much a part of him that childhood acquaintances who committed no mayhem seemed another species entirely. Life was something to be consumed, not savored, then shit out as quickly as possible. Years of turmoil and restless energy and a formless anger had brought him nothing but welts across the back from a distraught father who continually threatened disavowal, and a succession of run-ins with the law.

What a strange, strange lad. What a disappointment. He was educated, but not civilized. He looked in the mirror and saw only the dimmest capacity for greatness, buried in the roughest ore.

Great men must first become great masters of themselves, and connections eventually formed in his mind. The blue uniform that had heretofore meant only trouble gradually took on an air, not of mystique, but of practicality. Here was a channel for his violent exuberance. Here was a job he could love.

The Chicago Police Department was a most unexpected choice to those who knew him.

He applied. He was accepted. He was amazed.

The feel of the baton, the comforting weight of the service revolver … these became extensions of himself. They were the distillations of potent rage given a vessel to contain it. That he represented law and order was incidental. Far better was that he had been given both a license to inflict controlled miseries upon those whose word could never stand up to his

own, and a support system that backed him up when there were doubts. Valentine knew no fatigue when it came to subduing the guilty with bruising ferocity. He was respected by some, reviled by many, and feared by all, but the opinions of others had always been of low priority.

Six years it lasted, this urban bounty of bleeding heads and broken bones, cowering lowlifes and intimidated lovers. Six years before termination for repeated use of excessive force; you *really* had to be a monster to get the pink slip from this outfit. He tried to take the turn of events philosophically — only so many complaints could be lodged before the scales tilted inevitably against him. He'd had a fine run.

As well, he had long since taken measures to ensure a bonus to his income, a supplement with the potential to far surpass any paycheck the city of Chicago would ever cut him.

He had found the streets and weedy lots and decayed tenements to be a blue-steel cornucopia. Guns were everywhere, yet it seemed there was no end to the demand — a fine paradox. No gun made it to the evidence room if it could be avoided. Even those that did were occasionally misplaced. Shakedowns of suspects led to confiscations, as easy as picking apples from a tree.

It was a good racket. Investment was nil; the proceeds, 100 percent clear profit. His day job was such that he was in frequent touch with those who made the best customers, and some of them led him to connections greater still. By the time Valentine was fired from the police department, he was already masterminding break-ins at National Guard armories and manufacturer warehouses to truck away heavyweight hauls. Within another three years, he was plugged into an underground pipeline capable of supplying demolitions ordnance, rockets, mines, mortars, nearly everything that dealt a lethal blow short of nuclear.

Eternal demand, infinite supply. He had stumbled upon the one business that remained untouched by the whims of fickle economies. So long as one took precautions to avoid federal scrutiny, it was a seller's market. The groups all but lined up and took numbers: slothful insurrectionists and supremacist militants, international terrorists, private mercenary armies out to create third-world bloodbaths, and, after he had relocated operations to Boston, the IRA.

He took no sides, took only the rewards, but even the money paled beside the hypnotic thrill of tuning in news footage of some trouble spot in the nation or halfway around the world and knowing he might have contributed. Here, the flaming wreckage around a car packed with a quarter ton of plastique; there, the stilled body of some leader cut down by an assassination squad. *I am there*, he would think. He would stare with sated hunger at blood sprays on walls, at churning smoke, at fragments of devastated buildings. Where others saw misery, he saw poetry. Where they mourned senselessness, he recognized the fractal chaos of inevitability.

All things tend toward entropy.

His prayer: Let them burn and let them bleed, but most of all, let them go their way.

Had he believed in the divine at all, Valentine could surely have seen himself as its instrument; but he did not. He was but a man of his world and his times — to an extent a self-made man, but augmented, he came to understand, by deviant biology.

A decade ago, while in his mid-thirties, he had survived another facet of the world's patterned chaos. A malignant tumor had taken root in his scrotum and claimed both testicles before being excised. In the years to follow, while cancer stayed a vanquished foe, the obsessions it had inspired remained. Patrick Valentine could *not* get enough medical magazines written for the serious layman. Disease was fascinating. Disease was systemic failure that broke down the status quo.

Four years ago he had come across an article on misbegotten chromosomes and their exploitation in the sentencing hearing subsequent to a murder conviction in Texas. The name of Mark Alan Nance sparked dim recollection — a robbery and shooting spree, three days of outlawry in and around Houston. He'd had his fifteen minutes of infamy, then been forgotten by all but those involved.

Don't sentence my client to death, the defense attorney was arguing, because he could be genetically predisposed to commit the crimes for which he's been found guilty. Several months before his rampage, Mark Alan Nance and his wife had been genetically tested to determine why they had conceived a child with severe birth defects, a child that had eventually died. While the abnormalities had been traced to the maternal bloodline, Mark

Alan Nance had exhibited an unrelated deformity never suspected, not even known of until two years prior.

It was the first time Valentine had ever heard of Helverson's syndrome.

The article cited comparisons between the defense attorney's wrangling and trials conducted in the late sixties in which reduced sentences were requested for convicted murderers who had double-Y genotypes. Nance's attorney must have done his homework well. Many of the arguments were the same as those of twenty years before. Unhappy case studies of the scant handful of known Helverson's subjects were introduced as evidence.

But in the end, the Texas courts were unforgiving. Death row for Mark Alan Nance.

The arguments in mercy's favor and the portrayal of Nance's miserable life — social malcontent, uncontrolled rages, emotional cripple — rang enough common chords that Valentine began to feel a strange kinship with the convict, loser though the man may be. Above all, though, he had been riveted by the single jailhouse photo accompanying the article.

He looks exactly like I did at his age.

The article *had* mentioned a certain physical similarity among Helverson's progeny.

It was enough to drive Valentine to a private investigator, paying him well to compile data on the top researchers at MacNealy Biotech, the site of Helverson's original discovery and the primary data bank for its subsequent research. Most looked far too clean to even consider approaching with the kind of offer he was planning. Among them, surely at least one would possess less than bedrock ethical foundations … but which to choose? One wrong selection and he might never get another.

One of the scientists, however, had a skeleton in an old closet. Stanley Wyzkall had been fined several years before for tax evasion. God bless greed.

Valentine flew to Boston, where he arranged to meet with a perplexed Dr. Wyzkall, and paved his proposal with an endowment of $50,000. Ample rewards for information, for progress and understanding — what could be more noble? Discretion would be assured as well as demanded, particularly for Valentine's own genetic karyotype…

Which confirmed his every suspicion about himself.

Ironic. He had become the oldest identified Helverson's syndrome carrier — the first of a kind, possibly — and remained entirely off-record. Only after their deal was clinched did he stress to Wyzkall just how deep was his need for continued privacy.

"We'll get along beautifully as long as we stick to the simple guidelines I suggested," Valentine told him one day over lunch. "We'll both profit immeasurably." Then from a pocket he removed five pictures and dealt them across the table like a poker hand: Wyzkall himself, then wife, daughter, daughter, son. "But if you ever expose me? Stanley? I'll leave every single hair on your head untouched, but I'll center these other four heads in the crosshairs of a scope on a rifle so powerful there won't even be teeth left."

Valentine slid Wyzkall's own photo over to him, gathered the rest, and returned them to the pocket — patting them — over his heart. The man was speechless, but he had not paled. Admirable.

"Have you read Nietzsche?" Valentine then asked.

"No," Wyzkall murmured.

"He wrote, 'The great epochs of our life come when we gain the courage to rechristen our evil as what is best in us.'" With a frank and humorless smile, "Have courage, Stanley. And enjoy my money as much as I'm going to enjoy learning."

Dealing with the devil was the way Stanley Wyzkall chose to regard it, but Valentine took no offense.

And within two months, the devil decided to move his home and entire operation to the Boston area.

*

He drove back across the river and was home in Charlestown before the afternoon traffic thickened to its worst.

Valentine settled into his Cape Cod, secured it, checked every room and closet, made sure each room's pistol was where he normally kept it. Once he could breathe again, he eased into the armchair in the living room and did not leave it until he had gone through Clay Palmer's file from beginning to end. He read slowly, carefully, each word not so much comprehended as digested.

Another one to hope for, another in which to invest his dreams of a surrogate guardian. This one, Clay Palmer, would have the attentions of a therapist in these days of self-discovery, but what did doctors really understand? They sought the concrete and quantifiable because as long as they could measure something, it was the easiest way to chart progress. To underlying meanings they gave as little thought as they could get away with.

Clay Palmer would in many respects be the last to know what was important. Left to doctors, he would be told only as much as they thought prudent to *let* him know, as if it were a privilege and not his right.

Unacceptable.

Late in the night, Valentine repackaged Clay's file and took it into his bedroom, pulled back the rug in the center of the floor. Very solid floors in this house, teak, like the decks of old sailing ships. It made a solid anchor for the floor safe concealed beneath the rug and a removable panel.

He opened the safe and stowed the file, along with the dozen others he'd purchased. There they would spend the night until he awoke the next morning, refreshed, and could retrieve them for some selected photocopying.

When he would find time to make it to the post office was anyone's guess.

Sixteen

Adrienne only had to spend one night alone in the condo. A month's lease signed, renewable, she had moved in on Friday, and it seemed wrong, all wrong. The task had taken barely an hour. It looked like a home, but that was all. She spent the rest of Friday roaming rooms that had been furnished by someone else, a stranger, and trying to make herself comfortable on furniture that she had not bought. This was like wearing someone else's old jeans and trying to convince herself they fit just as well. She stood at windows overlooking the neighborhood — hedges and lawns and trees — and they looked lifeless. Three years in the desert and she had forgotten the desolate grip of early winter.

Come on, this too shall pass. This is where I live now.

Sarah arrived mid-afternoon on Saturday, having spread the journey over two days. Adrienne was outside to meet her almost as soon as she had stepped from the car, hugged her tightly and they kissed, and Adrienne wanted nothing more than to spend a few hours getting reacquainting with Sarah's wonderfully distracting body. It was under there somewhere, beneath all those clothes.

"I think somebody missed me," she said.

Adrienne squeezed her hand. "Don't let it go to your head."

And the crisp air smelled sweeter, felt for the first time invigorating rather than forbidding, while the sun strained more persistently behind its prison of clouds. The day had gone from vinegar to wine.

"Do you want the grand tour first," said Adrienne, "or are you itching to lug boxes already?"

"Show me, show me." Sarah fell in step beside her, toward the enclosed stairway to the second floor. "I dressed for the state, do I look like I belong here?"

Sarah tramped up the stairs in jeans and soft leather moccasin boots, a heavy knit sweater, and a down vest. She looked as if she'd just stepped from an ad for a ski lodge.

"Everybody's a chameleon," Adrienne told her.

After seeing the condo, Sarah granted approval, adding only that as long as someone else was picking up the tab, why not have gone for someplace with a hot tub as well?

They put off unloading the car until it seemed indecent. Sarah could never travel as lightly as Adrienne; always something she might want, might miss, might long to hold to remind her of another place or time. She packed keepsakes the way alcoholics packed bottles, always in reserve if needed.

Flashbacks came while carrying boxes from the car, a pleasant déjà vu of two years ago when the commitment had finally been made between them, the house in Tempe chosen, Adrienne acknowledging, *This is no passing fling, I love her, this is serious.* Friends had shown up that weekend to pitch in, those whom she had gotten to know and love through Sarah. Lesbian couples, mostly, who seemed to form their own extended family, and around whom Adrienne had at first been terribly insecure. Worrying, *Will they even accept me? I'm a half-breed.* They had, and it really came through that day. Everyone had toted crates and boxes and furniture, had made seats for themselves amid the half-finished jumble. Passing pizza and beer, they traded tales of old moves, horror stories of demolished possessions and runaway trucks and wrecked appliances and fires, those ruinous events that seem to grow more fondly hilarious the longer ago they happened. Adrienne found out that day why it is always wise to withhold the beer until the job is completed. It was the first day since leaving San Francisco that she had genuinely felt this new town to be her home, that her soul had taken root and found a sense of community.

Alone this time, just the two of them to share the burdens, though they were few, and she found herself missing the gathering of a tribe.

When they had everything in, Sarah ran for the door one last time. "Back in ten minutes, I swear," then she dashed off. Adrienne heard the car gunning back onto the street.

She began unpacking, sorting by destination: bedroom, bathroom, kitchen, unknown. One box she opened was labeled, in slapdash marker, Thesis Books. Had Sarah at last decided on a subject she would stick with? Adrienne was on her knees, browsing titles, when Sarah rushed through the doorway with flushed cheeks.

"I couldn't resist." She held up a bottle of wine. "I spotted a package store a few blocks away on Colfax. You want glasses or are you feeling hardcore today?"

"From the bottle's good," Adrienne murmured, still sorting among the books. This was odd. Given the half dozen or so topics Sarah had been flirting with, none of these books seemed to apply.

"Oh," Sarah said. "You found them."

"I gather you finally committed to something … but what *are* these?" Adrienne then dug out Erich Fromm's *The Anatomy of Human Destructiveness*, Carl Jung's *The Undiscovered Self*. "There are some of mine in here."

Sarah had the bottle uncorked and headed out of the kitchen, taking the first pull. "You don't mind, do you?"

"Of course not," accepting the bottle to make the christening of the temporary new home official. She handed it back and went randomly diving for more. "*Apocalypse Culture … The Theory and Practice of Apathy … Tried as Adults … Generation X*, even? What did you finally decide on?"

Sarah sank down to the floor, opposite Adrienne, over the box. "You won't get mad, will you?"

"No…" Saying it automatically, hating that prefacing question; she always had. It was like waving a red flag: You're going to hate this.

Why were you having an affair, Neal?

Well, you won't get mad, will you?

"The idea started taking shape a week ago," Sarah began, "right after you left with Clay. And then when we talked on Tuesday after you'd spent the night before with his friends, that only firmed it up more."

Adrienne sat motionless, not liking the way this was heading. Clay, the friends he wouldn't even refer to as friends … this was too close.

"Don't look at me that way." Sarah leaned forward, elbows propped on the spines of books. "I want to do my thesis on the social climate and milieu that Clay and the others come out of. That kind of doomsday subculture and malaise that are woven through the post-boomer generation. All those people who missed out on the banquet, and mostly got stuck with the leftovers and the bills. The ones who don't have any hope or faith left, to the extent that they don't even see the point of trying."

Adrienne shook her head. "You're doing it again." Hoping to argue on the side of generalities rather than specifics. "Another idea rears it head, and you just can't get enough of it. Do you know how many times I've listened to this same kind of pitch?"

"What, are you keeping score?"

"Six times, Sarah."

"So I've finally committed myself to one. You knew it had to happen eventually. This is what I want to do. This is the one."

"And I've heard that line, too." She snatched the bottle away and belted down a swallow, flipped the silky blond hair up off her neck; it suddenly felt too hot. "And I suppose if you stumble across some lost tribe up in the Rockies, then that'll be the one, *the* one, the *big* one."

"Objection!" Sarah cut in. "Ludicrous example." And Adrienne nodded, *Oh, all right, so it is, I speak in principle but have it your way.*

Sarah took the bottle from her and set it aside so she could hold her by both hands. "I told you I wanted to do something I could get really passionate about. And I think this matters very much. Besides," she said, squeezing Adrienne's hands, "my adviser liked it."

She felt some of the starch flow from her shoulders. Well. Well. This *did* shed a light of validation on things, didn't it?

"Cultural anthropology?" she said softly. "Fishbine thought this idea fit?"

Sarah nodded. "He's actually pretty progressive." She let go of Adrienne's hands and implored with her own as she rocked up onto her haunches. "I think the next time the world yields up another lost tribe, that'll be it. There won't be any more. We've found them all and most of the time they've become a little more like us, and they're never any better for it. And you know? That's what intrigues me most, why *we're* the ones so screwed up.

"There's nothing I could do with a more primitive culture that wouldn't be redundant. So why not look at my own the way it is *right now*? The whole field of anthropology, it's been at a kind of pivotal point for the past several years. It's still asking the same questions, but we have to ask them in a whole new context. So in a way, the whole field becomes fresh all over again."

"Because the world's changed so much," Adrienne said.

"That's right. It's taking a new look at family structures, gender and race relations. Migration. Warfare. Law and order. All of those things are giving us fits right now and it's because we mostly ignored them, except in the most superficial ways." Sarah ran both hands back through her hair and it became a savage mane. "I just want to be part of that. It excites me."

"I know," said Adrienne. "I understand that. But…" And why such a prickly reception to this? She knew perfectly well that Sarah had not come up here to intellectually seduce Clay from her, but to be just as perfectly irrational, that was exactly how it felt. And she almost had to laugh. Fighting over a man? That was the *last* thing she'd ever expected to happen.

"But what?" asked Sarah.

Oh, out with it. "It feels like a tremendous conflict of interest brewing here. Almost to the point of it being unethical."

"I thought about that. But you're not in a clinical setting anymore. As soon as you brought him into your home — my home, too — and agreed to take him to his, you entered a new area. I'm not one of them, but some people would call *that* unethical. But it's a weird case, so…" Sarah shook her head. "You're taking a good long look at Clay in his natural environment to see how it relates to him. I just want to take a look at his natural environment to see how it relates to everyone."

And this was it, wasn't it? Adrienne looked at her bluntly. "You're in my territory now."

"That's what really bothers you, isn't it?"

Adrienne sat still for a moment, then nodded.

Sarah cocked one corner of her mouth, like a disgruntled teenager. "You have a problem with sharing sometimes."

It should have stung. Another time it might have, but not now. Because it felt justified? "It's an occupational hazard."

Sarah took the wine bottle, rolled it between flattened palms for contemplative moments. "Answer me one thing: What do you think I'm going to *do* to Clay, or anyone else?"

"Do?" Adrienne blinked. "I'm not sure I follow — "

"Yes you do. What effect do you think I'm going to have on the reason you're here?"

Adrienne tried to answer, found she could not. This had cut the legs from beneath her. With Clay's friends — or whatever they were to him —

she wasn't even sure she should remain in contact. They had met and she had learned what they were like and perhaps that should be enough, although to be honest, a couple of them, Nina and Twitch, she had rather liked.

She pictured Sarah with them, all of them, plus any other peripheral folks who drifted along. Anthropologically speaking, fieldwork involved living with a group for a time and assimilating a part of them. She wasn't so sure she liked the tone of what Sarah would be taking in.

Based on what she had seen the other night, they were bitter and spiteful, they had no direction in their lives, and when they weren't staring morosely at the world at large, they were picking at one another. Well, sometimes you had to make a conscious effort to see the light of day, and it really was worth the effort; tell yourself, *Get on with it,* that the world didn't end for you unless you let it happen. Adrienne knew that, as a professional, she wasn't supposed to react to others judgmentally, but sometimes you still just felt like slapping someone.

And this was the emotional environment that Sarah would be assimilating? Adrienne could see nothing constructive coming of this —

And she realized how ridiculous that sounded. As if she were turning into her own mother, anybody's mother, circa the teen years: *I don't like those friends of yours, they're a bad influence.*

So what did that leave her with, simple jealousy?

"We take the same kind of oath, you know," Sarah told her. "You're not an M.D. but that doesn't matter. Do no harm.' That applies to you, too. From my end, it's 'Never endanger the informant.' And we wouldn't be working at cross-purposes. I might even be of help to you. I come at things from a different perspective. So I might see something that you miss."

Adrienne nodded. *I'm the only one here who came to make an impact. She didn't…*

She came to be impacted.

"I'll leave this up to you," Sarah said. "If you say no, I'll live with that."

Adrienne straightened, sharply. "Don't do this to me. I don't make your decisions for you and I'm not starting with this one."

Sarah took a long, slow drink of the wine. Reached over to retrieve her down vest from where she had dropped it on the floor, held it on her lap.

Was it as manipulative a gesture as it felt? So subtle, so damnably subtle. In the moment Adrienne felt lost, helpless, imagining how Sarah must have been with her father ten, fifteen years ago. Twisting him around her finger as teenage girls are wont to do. She might have gotten anything.

"What are we going to do, Adrienne?" she asked.

"Stay," was all that finally rose to her lips, as she pulled the vest from Sarah's lap, hands, intentions. "Stay."

Seventeen

Keeping his appointments with Adrienne, Clay began to see, was a matter of faith, faith that something good would come of them. It had become more binding here than during his tenure on Ward Five, when he had nothing else to do. Now he actually had to extend an effort.

He liked the condo better than the hotel. The hotel hadn't worked for him at all, if only for a single session, but what a bust that session had been. Sitting in chairs by the window, the round table dragged aside so that it would be no barrier between them, but that hadn't helped. He'd sat there for most of the time as if a cork were in his brain, and had left with a headache as bad as the pain after he'd smashed his forehead with the cast.

He found he could relax at Adrienne's condo, maybe a quarter of the living room given to a desk and a pair of chairs and a love seat. If he did not let his eyes stray too far he could sustain the illusion it was an actual office. She had obviously gone to some trouble for him.

What he had not counted on, though, was seeing her lover up here. Sarah. An unexpected delight, that. She had to know what he was and what was wrong with him — doctors weren't supposed to talk but he never believed they didn’t — yet not once could he catch her looking at him as if he belonged in a sideshow. She headed out the door after a couple minutes and he almost told them there was no need, but stopped. Adrienne did not seem that loose about it all; had to maintain protocol, if nothing else.

They had exchanged the couch for a love seat, but the routine was familiar by now: his back to the wall, following where thought and memory and psychic wreckage led. There were times he regarded his head as a jar, Adrienne's occasional questions and prompts just more swipes of a kitchen knife to make sure he was scraped out as clean as possible.

Will there ever be an end to this? he wondered, and of course there would be, but when *would* they have enough? He had to admit he felt better since having someone to unload on, to talk with and not just be talked at, but this remission would surely last no longer than the treatment itself. Still, the thought of turning it into a lifetime habit would be enough to make him

opt for Erin's joke. *You look like they gave you a lobotomy,* she had laughed when seeing the stitches across his brow. Assuming he lived to fifty, he could not picture himself in this same pose, week after week. *Go ahead,* he would have to tell them at some point, while tapping his frontal lobe. *Drill here, make it messy.*

There *would* come an end. Adrienne would someday return home. Maybe she would be the one to decide enough was enough. Or maybe those footing the bills would seal the purse and leave her with no choice. And then? Adrift again and perhaps no better than before, the inside of his head spread thin for everyone's benefit but his own. Perhaps someone, somewhere, waiting for the pressures to again mount within him, watching from afar for his greatest explosion, so they might nod and concur, *Yes, we all feared it would happen someday but we could not hold him. Let us learn from this tragic mistake.*

So maybe it really was best to try while he had the chance.

I am what my birth made me but isn't there some way to rise above it? There should be. There must *be.*

"Let me ask you something," he said, far into the session. "Do you think people are inherently good or bad?"

Adrienne shifted to one side in her chair. "Always asking the easy questions, aren't you?"

He shrugged: *Sorry, just being myself.* She now knew better than to try ducking these questions, or turning them around back onto him; he had conditioned her well; he could be relentless in pursuing where she stood on matters.

Clay watched as she formulated her answer — the soft tilts of her head, the interplay between hand and ear. Away from the hospital she was no longer wearing her hair pinned back. Good for her; it made her look so much less prim. She now looked like a Nordic athlete.

"No, I don't," she said. "I believe there's a capacity in everyone to fulfill a certain potential. But whether or not they reach it, and how it emerges — say, whether it's constructive or destructive — depends largely on the experiences they've had, and there you get into so many cultural and environmental factors that it's impossible to even list them all. But then, in most people those experiences are an ongoing process, so I certainly don't believe they're locked in."

"So life experience, this overrides biology."

"In my book it usually can."

"So you think I can save myself." He knew what was coming —

"What do you think?"

Nailed it. "I believe *you* think so."

"You know what I meant."

Clay nodded: *Yeah, just sparring with you.* "You're probably right. I suppose I do believe in the power of the individual. But we're not left alone, we don't live in vacuums. I've tried and it doesn't work. Other people always want in, even if they have to force themselves in. So that negates the power of the individual. I think it's mostly in a collective sense that we're failures. Like a chain being only as strong as its weakest link. The same thing applies to a society. It's no better, no stronger, than its lowest offenders."

"That discounts a lot of good that people do for others," said Adrienne, and he thought she was probably picturing Mother Teresa right now. She *would*.

"That doesn't discount it, that just puts it in a context of being hopeless, more or less. It's individuals that do good, but individuals die. It's societies that chew everything up, and they keep right on going until there's nothing left." He took a deep breath. "I think the world's been shaking itself down for a long time, trying to bottom out toward a lowest common denominator…

"But that's just one weak link's opinion. Got any coffee?"

And they went on for another forty minutes or so, until Clay at last decided he was talked out for one afternoon, then realized they had been at this for more than an hour and a half.

On the way to the door he asked if she and Sarah had plans for the following night, confident they would not. Who else would they know here, who else had they had *time* to know? Adrienne asked why before she answered.

"Thought you might like to head over to Graham's awhile," he said. "You told him you'd like to see his work. Sarah would like it, probably."

"I'll ask her."

"She'll say yes," Clay said, so sure of himself that he didn’t look at her when detouring into the kitchen to grab a notepad by the phone and

write directions.

*

He did not even attempt to show his paintings — that was the thing Clay never understood about Graham. Content to let them be seen only by close acquaintances, and the occasional stranger who had heard of them and wore him down through persistence, Graham consigned them to the walls of his basement apartment and studio. They hung alone, bleak portals made even more so by the absence of frames, somehow more naked and raw that way, and so far as Clay knew, none of them had a name.

"I don't see why you shouldn't," Clay had once said about Graham's reticence to exhibit. "People go for H.R. Giger, they should go for yours."

Graham had shaken his head, so appalled at the idea that he had to light a cigarette to put himself right again. "It's not a question of acceptance. Galleries expect you to stand around that first night and make putrid small talk to people who'd cross the street to avoid you any other time. No, I *don't* think so."

"Like that would stop you from walking out if you felt like it," Clay had said, knowing this was just one more excuse. Graham had so many they should be numbered. "Anyway, I've figured out what the plan is. You're going to wait until you die early and they'll find everything and you'll become this cult celebrity."

Graham's face had lifted with a Mona Lisa smile, aloof and knowing; here's to life and untimely death and skyrocketing market values. "It *would* be a hilarious inside joke, wouldn't it?"

Clay had agreed. It was only the young and talented who became gods after their deaths. The mediocre were even more completely forgotten, and the old went on to just rewards. Only the young seeded debates of speculation, what might have been.

At the time he had been jealous, thinking, *I'll die and there won't be a thing left behind, not one lasting bit of graffiti I scrawled on this world to say I passed through.* Now he knew he'd been wrong. At least geneticists would know his name. He wondered if they would store his brain in a jar, or keep even more of him around, like the skeleton of Truganini, last of the extinct Tasmanians, displayed for the generations to follow. *Better living through the study of mutants* could be their motto.

And thus he was in a contemplative mood arriving at Graham's on Monday night. Erin, pale blond hair ethereal against her baggy black sweater, was already there to film his arrival, or maybe she had been there all day — he'd not talked with her since she'd spent Friday night with him. Nina came alone; Twitch was at work. Sarah and Adrienne were last, Sarah bringing a few bottles of wine.

They all seemed to get along. One would never know that Sarah was walking in on a roomful of strangers. With Graham she got into a discussion of Dali and Francis Bacon; with Nina she discovered they were both fans of the writing of Charles Bukowski. Even Erin dropped her guard and warmed up rather quickly, and elicited no judgment when she sprang her frequent test, telling how she earned part of her income. Erin shared industry secrets, told Sarah what Clay had already known for some time: splattered semen in still-life cum-shots was hardly ever real, but a mixture of unflavored gelatin for viscosity and dishwashing liquid for pearlescence, and was squirted from a small turkey baster.

"I never thought it quite looked real," Sarah said.

Adrienne glanced askance at her. "How would you *know*?"

"I grew up with three brothers, don't forget. Puberty wasn't always dry."

"That might've been enough to turn *me* to women," Erin said.

Graham made a small grunt. "But think of all the fascinating career highlights you would've missed out on."

She turned back to him, almost coy, as coy as Erin could be when actually herself. "Don't be jealous, when they're in my mouth I'm still thinking of you."

"Where are they when you're thinking of Clay?"

Erin frosted, just a bit, a fine ice-eyed edge of pique. "Wherever it feels good," she said, and left it at that.

Clay added nothing, content to stay out of it, thinking only, *This can't last, this triangle.* Someone was eventually bound to get seriously hurt, and he doubted he would be the one, no matter what transpired.

Soon, Adrienne talked Graham into giving them a tour of his paintings, and he consented. Walking them through the haphazard placement, in black jeans and T-shirt, an apple picker's cap atop his limp curls, and an open bottle of wine planted against one hip, he reminded Clay

of some lost Parisian, out of place and out of time, and especially out of faith in himself. The canvases came with frequent disclaimers: I should have painted over that one; I was drunk most of that month.

"Compliment him enough," Clay told Adrienne, "and maybe he'll give you one. Anything to replace that washed-out impressionist crap in your office."

He skipped out on most of the tour; had seen them all many times. The grimy metal structures rendered in oils and acrylics; the furnaces, the bridges to nowhere, the girders turned to pretzels by holocausts unknown. But then he realized that, off in one gloomy corner, Graham had begun discussing a painting he had not yet seen. On his way over, he heard Graham say it had been done the whole time Clay had been gone. Bastard, hadn't even told him about this one.

He admired it beside Adrienne and Sarah, seeing it as they must. The difference in scope was obvious at a glance. While the earlier works had but one subject, with this, the eye hardly knew where to begin. Graham had to have poured nearly every spare moment into this over the weeks Clay had been AWOL, and even then it was … it was…

Astounding, was what it was.

"It reminds me of Bosch," Sarah said.

Graham, pleased, nodded. "There's nothing new left to be done in painting. If it's not just pure form and no content, then it's all self-referential in one way or another. So I figured why not be blatant about the reference."

He went on to explain how he'd taken the right wing from Hieronymus Bosch's triptych *The Garden of Delights* — the portion depicting Hell as a dark, phantasmagoric landscape teeming with countless figures either suffering or meting out judgment — and reconfigured it for the postindustrial age. The painting crawled with the malevolence of machines; some were alone, others linked by networks of pipe and cable. They ground small, fragile humans into ruined clots beneath their treads, in their hydraulics, between their gears. Where Bosch's silhouetted city raged in flames across the top, here decrepit factories gasped their last in the red glow of smoldering coal pits. Where Bosch's Hell teemed with demons in the form of grotesque hybrid animals, Graham saw traitorous humans, themselves become half-machine.

"What about the triptych concept?" Sarah asked. "Bosch depicted the Earth and Paradise, too. Are you planning on…?"

"I thought about it. But I just couldn't come up with any comparable vision I thought was pleasant enough to bother with." Graham shrugged this way and that, watched his foot as he twisted the tip of his shoe against the bare concrete floor. "In Bosch's day, you know, they still *believed* in Paradise."

Clay left the three of them talking, wandered back into the living area. Erin was rolling joints on the kitchen counter, and maybe he would partake soon. Wishing already he could join in with the wine, be like everyone else, but not really up to the violent nausea and thunderous headache sure to come. *Thank you, chromosome twelve, thank you so much for everything.* Sometimes oblivion could be so inviting.

"Hey you." Nina, coming up from behind, fresh from the bathroom in a diaphanous swirl of gypsy cloth and wavy red hair. "You're awfully quiet tonight."

"Sorry," he said, "I never realized."

Plump-cheeked and smiling brightly, she slipped back around behind him, clamped onto his shoulders with hands soft and warm, squeezed twice in an offer of amateur massage before he flexed out of her grip and took a step just beyond reach.

"I forgot," she mumbled with apology, creamy brow furrowed.

He nodded but didn't believe her. She was just testing to see if anything had changed while he'd been away, been cured, if anything in him had inched closer to her view of the way normal people behaved. He was sorry to disappoint. He had just never liked being touched, unless something more animal was sure to come of it. Sex, or fighting — probably both qualified, and weren't even so different. Both involved tearing into someone else. Touching for its own sake was like making a promise that would eventually have to be broken.

"Graham's being sweet tonight, have you noticed?" she said.

"Maybe he remembered to take his Prozac."

"Clay!" she bawled, half-laughing, half-chastising. He did like to make her laugh, on the rare occasions he actually managed. Nina was the sort who looked as if she needed to laugh more, even deserved to. Laughter was kind to her, erasing the damage and hurt accrued just by being alive.

Sometimes he had to wonder why she and Uncle Twitch hung out with the rest of them. They were too optimistic, too kind. They would be cannibalized someday.

"Why shouldn't he be sweet?" said Clay. "He has admirers and he didn't have to do anything to get them over here. He gets to maintain his front."

"Well," Nina shifted her rounded shoulders, a tacit agreement, "you know how he can be. I worry about him sometimes. While you were gone? A couple weeks went by that *nobody* saw him, not even Erin. I thought maybe he went out on your trail."

"Erin didn't mention that." He shrugged. "He was probably just locked in here working the entire time. Have you seen that new painting?"

"It's not good for him to be that alone, he's not like you. Graham thinks he doesn't need other people, but he does." Nina's eyes were wide and she nodded, an innocent sage.

"Mostly to try to salvage his own ego."

"That's still needing them."

He smiled at her, could not help it. Saint Nina. He wondered how she discussed him behind his back, what kind things she would find to say that, if he heard them, would make him blush or gag, knowing them to be revisionist varnish. *When I die,* he would get around to telling her someday, *you write the obituary.*

Clay got up, had to move. Drifted about the maze of the basement apartment, the half walls and squared brick pillars that came down to anchor the house above, and made Graham's home seem smaller than it really was, more complex. In one far corner was a door to a big storage room. When Clay passed it he noticed a faint odor lingering about the corner. He put his nose to the door crack and sniffed — stronger, an old after-scent like brimstone, fires recently burned in the hearts of iron forges.

He opened the door and the scent rolled out of the black. Nothing inside that he could see but a mere shape, massive and still, like a boulder carved raggedly square by ancient Mayan hands, then shrouded in pale drop cloths —

And then a hand, this one flesh and blood, splayed on the door to push it out of his grasp, to close it.

"No," Graham said. "I meant to get a padlock for that door."

"What's in there?"

"No, no. No. Don't ask me about it." Graham twisted in place, looking painfully at the floor for a moment, leaving his hand on the door. "It's not ready yet."

"A sculpture?" But surely not, Graham had never before worked on anything approaching such a scale, nothing he could not set upon a tabletop with ease. Although clearly he had taken some leap with that new painting, upgrading his obsessions into grander dimensions.

"I told you not to ask me." Something burned in Graham's eyes, those dark eyes alight and saying, *I'm in control, I know what I'm doing,* that look approaching pure transcendence just before someone tries to fly out a window.

"Sorry," Clay said, and it was Graham again, the Graham he had always known. Always? As much always as you could fit into four years.

"You feel like going out?" Graham asked. "Sarah wants to go to The Foundry. Sounds good to me, I'm sick of this place."

Clay said sure, The Foundry, anytime, knowing he had lost his one and only chance for a sneak preview. Graham would have a lock on the door by the time he was *here again*. Graham kept promises. He was funny that way.

Eighteen

Why was the question Adrienne kept coming back to about Clay and the other dozen. What spotty knowledge she had of genetics had been picked up just since Clay's karyotype had been run, but it simply did not seem feasible that Helverson's syndrome could have remained undetected until six years ago, not when karyotypes had been run since 1956. Were it that rare, it seemed statistically unlikely that thirteen subjects would then be found in just six years, had this mutation been in the gene pool for centuries.

But suppose it were a more recent mutation, spontaneously arising within the last generation or two?

Such dramatically swift changes were not impossible. The higher incidence of hypertension among black Americans was now thought to trace back to the days of slavery, when the bodies of Africans in oceanic transit — chained below deck for weeks in sweltering holds and denied adequate water — quickly learned to retain vital salts rather than sweat them out. A swiftly adapted biological survival mechanism that, ironically, was now impairing lives rather than sustaining them.

But again, Helverson's: *Why?* What possible function could it serve? She could not, in good conscience, consider it an illness.

While a gross mutation, it was not a debilitating condition on par with Down's and Wolf-Hirschborn syndromes. There was no developmental abnormality as with any of several misprints affecting the sex chromosomes. So far as she could discern, Helverson's syndrome manifested itself — aside from benign facial-structure similarities, and such frequently reported quirks as resistance to sedatives and alcohol intolerance — in emotional and psychological affect. But detrimentally so: Its carriers seemed ill-equipped to contend with standard human stresses and interactions. If there was a common thread running through the dozen case studies, and now Clay's life, this was it.

Experience can override biology, she had assured him, but here the data challenged that precept. Among the thirteen, there was not a single

exception to what looked to be a depressing rule.

All along she had wanted to believe that, as in countless other behavioral disturbances, genetics may have played a factor in predisposing someone to certain tendencies, but whether or not these were manifested was due to upbringing and environmental conditions. An authoritarian father, an abusive mother, a loveless home … one or more trigger mechanisms. A room packed with gunpowder may sit calmly for a lifetime, as long as it's never introduced to a spark.

While she could not know everything about the first dozen, their backgrounds seemed to transcend even those broad criteria. One of the Americans, a twenty-seven-year-old named Timothy Van der Leun, whose home was listed as Indianapolis, was the son of a Lutheran minister whose family had cooperated fully in research, and had been found to be quite loving and healthy. Yet Van der Leun's life had been plagued by much the same turmoil as the rest.

While thirteen made a tiny research population by most lab standards, it was nevertheless difficult not to make sweeping conclusions based on available evidence. That extra chromosome *did* something to them. It heightened aggression and curtailed more tender emotions. It turned them into outsiders, adrift in societies for which they had more contempt than love.

What a find it would be if one were located whose life had taken a placid course. It would belie everything she was thinking while trying so hard not to. It would bury the notion that the stigma surrounding Helverson's was pure biological determinism. It would prove they were *not* prisoners of a rogue chromosome.

For that matter, what a find it would be if one were located who was female. More statistical unease.

If she allowed her intuitive right brain to leapfrog ahead of its logical left counterpart, it would almost appear as if something were deliberately guiding this. Some bored god shuffling molecular parts in a new configuration — there, let's see how this works.

She was big on theory, conjecture. Dutifully, she logged her evaluations of Clay in her notebook computer. She composed weekly reports and uploaded them to the mainframe at Arizona Associated Labs. She sought weekly feedback from Ferris Mendenhall, a link to the structure

of Ward Five, almost distrusting his opinion that she was handling the case as well as could be expected from anyone.

She told them all how Clay professed to be more at ease with the world since having a trusted therapist to talk with, and they all found that of interest. She was just waiting for them to tell her to cut him off, therapeutically speaking; see if he reverted.

At his next Wednesday session, following Sarah's introduction to the others at Graham's, he was in fine form, low-key, and she gently worked her way around to a discussion of the possibility of a spontaneous mutation that had some as yet unexplainable reason behind it. Thinking this may be a good way, after another session or two, to reveal the existence of the others. Perhaps he would be strong enough now to handle the fact of them, their lives. Their sad lives.

She found his response to today encouraging, Clay as intrigued as if this were an evolutionary mystery to be solved, and he a smoking gun.

Her only real fear was ethical: In getting Clay to consider the possibility of some process at work here, rather than a random fluke, was she overstepping her bounds of authority? Dabbling in lines of thought for which she was unqualified?

No, that's the problem with science, there are too many delineations, she told herself in rebuttal. *Too many specialists who can't let themselves see beyond their specialty. Too many experts dividing the material body from immaterial consciousness.*

Western medicine was only recently beginning to admit what Eastern physicians had known for thousands of years: All things are one, connected, interdependent.

And most times she thought she would rather be boldly wrong than so narrowly timid she dared never stick her neck out.

The only drawback: You could never know how wrong you might be.

*

He came over Thursday afternoon, unexpected, unannounced, and, once she got a good look into his eyes, unbalanced. Clay stormed past her with a sheaf of papers clutched in one fist, trembling as he bristled from the core.

"Don't lie to me," he said, voice a raw crack of air. "I'll smell it from you this time."

She could feel it instantly, that same cold squeeze of her heart she'd known that day in her office when Clay had experienced a minor breakthrough, trembling with furies she did not wholly trust him to contain. He had become that Clay all over again, Clay at the breaking point, an atavism with the smell of the city wafting from his clothes.

Adrienne was acutely aware of the door at her back, how alone she was, Sarah off with Nina, doing Nina things, the two of them new friends, Nina probably asking for lessons, *Teach me how to be a lesbian.*

She shut the door, could not run now. She had expected this to be a smooth process? Setbacks were inevitable.

"Tell me what's wrong," she said.

"You held back from me. You held back information from me!"

Frowning, Adrienne stepped forward, inner alarms giving way to curiosity.

"Tell me if these places strike you as having anything in common." He could not stand still, pacing with the frightening deliberate monotony of a lion in a cage, back and forth between the sofa and the open bar that bordered the kitchen. "Los Angeles, Texas — death row no less — Indianapolis."

Her breath lodged in her throat.

"Seattle, let's see, that's it for this country, umm, oh yeah, Canada's got one."

One question huge, echoing: How had this *happened*?

"Two for Japan, the little fuckers probably build cars that blow up on impact" — wheeling on her then, screaming into her face — *"Have you figured out yet what I'm talking about?"*

Everything she had accomplished with him, the distances she had brought him in two months — Adrienne could sense them slipping away. Any danger from Clay was forgotten as soon as she recognized the hurt stamped upon every feature of his face. The ache, the sense of betrayal. The loathing. This must be the feeling of pulling someone to the brink of safety from a flood, and just as they rise cold and shivering from the murky depths, seeing them disappear once more, traceless in an eye blink, no second chances.

How? *How?*

Sarah? Could Sarah have copied some of this information and given it to him? Would she have? Surely not.

"All right, Clay, listen to me." She strove for reasoned calm that she did not possess. "I understand that you must feel — "

"No! No, you don't! I used to think you might, but you *don't* understand or you wouldn't have let me find out this way!" One arm trembled in the air, then he snatched up a cereal box from the bar — Sarah's breakfast — and hurled it across the kitchen. It struck the corner of the range hood, bursting like a boil, cereal showering across the stovetop and counter and floor. "There's twelve more and they're just like I am, they're *all* this way!"

She made herself take one more step in his direction. "Clay, show me what you're holding."

He threw them at her, most of the pages staying together in a sheaf that struck her full in the face. She started backward, more in surprise than anything; an unaccountable shame, like a slap in the face. When she rubbed a tingling spot at the outer corner of one eye her finger came back with a spot of blood, seeping from a tiny paper cut. It was an awakening — he might really do her harm.

"Calm *down*, Clay," speaking firmly, with neither anger nor trembling. "I do realize you're upset about this… " On and on, empathetic, soothing. She stooped to gather the stray pages, scanned them quickly, found them to be photocopies of the introductory overviews from each of the prior twelve case studies.

Adrienne looked up and saw him glaring, at last rooted to one spot. Not knowing if it was good or bad.

"Where did these come from?"

"I got them in the mail."

"And there was nothing else with them?"

He jabbed a finger toward the papers. "You haven't gotten to it yet."

She shuffled until she found it. The note posed only more questions; a skimpy cover letter, a single sentence typed near the top of a sheet of plain white paper: *In case they haven't already told you, you're not alone in the world.* There was no signature.

She was at a complete loss to explain this, the sort of thing that might be laughed off as a cruel joke were the information not available to such an

exclusive few, all of whom should know better than to tamper with someone with such a vulnerable — and volatile — state of mind.

"Did you bring the envelope this came in?"

"No." His laboring breath seemed very loud to her; even his lungs sounded stressed. "No return address, if that's what you're wondering. The mailing label was typed. It was postmarked from Boston."

The city in which Helverson's had been discovered. The name of the lab escaped her at the moment, though she could not believe anyone there would perform such a grossly negligent stunt. People got hurt this way, someone learning too much, too soon.

"Why didn't you tell me?" he asked.

"I know you're feeling betrayed," she said. Trying to imagine such an all-inclusive betrayal: his family, the world, nature itself. *And now me.* "You may not believe me, but I hope you do. I was about ready to tell you, after another session or two. It wasn't a question of keeping this a secret from you, Clay. Never that. I was waiting until I felt the time was right — that you'd been stable enough, for long enough, that you could handle the news." *Better than you're handling it now.*

"Good idea!" he screamed. "Great fucking idea, wait and let somebody else do it, everybody knows except me, everybody but the mutant!"

For two months she had watched him wage his battles, those intensely private wars with himself, with his impulses, with fears and memories and truths. She had seen him emerge with victories, draw stalemates, and while he had at times been bested, always, always, she had believed he would in the end win out. Part of it was faith in Clay, the rest faith in her own dedication.

There could be no greater heartbreak, then, than to realize she may have been deluded. He might actually lose, helpless to save himself, she powerless to prevent it.

Clay grabbed one of the round-topped stools sitting at the bar, upended it so that he held it by the ends of two legs.

"They just decide they want to push my buttons" — he brought the stool crashing down against the bar — "see if that fucks me over too" — the stool's heavy wooden framework cracked apart, and he battered it down again, again — "this is just another *experiment*" — shrapnel and splinters

rained, and the cushioned seat flew in a wobbly arc to slam against the far kitchen wall — "so you go back and tell them it worked! Adrienne!"

As the stool had broken apart, he'd been left with a little less in hand for the next downswing. She had moved neither to stop him nor to flee, for if old theories were correct, property destruction was a safety valve to keep him from committing assault. The bar now scarred, his surrogate Adrienne, perhaps. Or a stand-in for everyone he remembered poking and prodding his body and mind. *He will not strike me, he will not strike me, he will not strike me.*

He finally stopped, pieces of the stool scattered over ten-foot radius. Clay flung the last flimsy shards to the floor, then turned on her, breath heavy upon her face, furnace-hot and feral, the breath of a lion.

"Give me that," he said through clenched teeth, and tore the papers from her nerveless fingers.

To the door.

From outside herself, she watched Clay's stride and her own after him, mentally fumbling in her inimitable way with the proper things to say, out of textbooks and lectures and experience. All had fled; just as well. They would serve her no better than muteness.

"Stay out of my head," he told her, and didn’t look back.

*

She wished for so many things after that afternoon: at first, that Clay would cool down and return a more reasonable man, to resume where their sessions had left off. Later, as the days wore on, she simply wished that he would accept her phone calls.

Sometimes he would answer, and Adrienne took heart that at least he was not sitting home listening to it ring. Once he heard her voice, though, nothing could save the connection. His hang-ups were worrisome things by their very method. No receiver slammed back down in rage, as she might have expected. Instead, she could feel its pause midway between his ear and the cradle, as if he lingered deliberately, and each time she would think, *This might be the one,* just before he hung up once more, softly, scarcely a click. It was torture; he would know that.

She made irate phone calls to Ferris Mendenhall and Arizona Associated Labs, unsatisfying conversations that got her nowhere. No, no one had okayed a mailing of case overviews to Clay Palmer. They would

check into it. Hang in there, be patient, see if he comes around, and if he doesn't, monitor him via his peer group if possible. A few times she came close to phoning MacNealy Biotech but quelled the urge. Hurling hazy accusations could only make a bigger fool of her than she already felt.

She checked with the others, with Erin and Graham, with Nina and Twitch. Twitch? She felt somehow unentitled to call him that, but didn't know his real name; perhaps none of them did. And all any of them could tell her was that Clay was making himself scarce from them, as well. Give him time, maybe he would come around; he always had before.

Don't you care any more than that? she felt like crying into the phone. *He told me you were at least there for one another, you covered each other's backs and cauterized each other's wounds.*

Then it occurred to her: Maybe they were doing exactly that. Maybe their apathetic voices were a shield erected around him, to keep her away.

She made several trips to his apartment, knocking on a door that he never answered. Sometimes silence from within, at times the chatter of televised news, no guarantee he was there but she knew he was, the evidence as indisputable as it was invisible. She could feel his formless and confused hostility radiating through the door: *I hate you because I don't know what else to do.*

Denver lay in the grip of deep autumn, winter on its way, but she felt frozen out already, every leafless tree a stark monument to a withdrawal so cold it burned.

Sarah held her through the lengthening nights, and often throughout each day, telling Adrienne, "You weren't wrong, you did nothing wrong, you got undermined by somebody you could never even have accounted for. Some jerk who wouldn't even sign his name."

Until one night, late, very late, the two of them in bed and setting aside books they both were too distracted to concentrate on, Sarah stroked her hair and Adrienne shut her eyes and curled against Sarah's side. It was safe here, in this warm nook.

"You know," Sarah said, "that I'd never want to usurp your authority with Clay. But … why don't I give it a shot?"

Adrienne lay very still, for a time content to listen to the wind moaning around the eaves, the frozen mountain wind. Finally she accepted the inevitable and nodded.

"Okay," she said, feeling not so much that she was giving up on Clay, as that she was giving him away.

*

In practical terms there was no such thing as neutral ground, not when he lived in this city and she did not. The whole of Denver was Clay's turf; she was just passing through. People were territorial that way, without even realizing. It would be a mistake to pretend otherwise, just because asphalt yielded no crops.

Sarah tracked him down to a part of town she supposed all cities had, where train tracks snarled together like stitches across a wounded earth, and blackened trestles stood weary from the generations; where vacant lots grew choked with weeds that were brown even in the bloom of spring; where low brick buildings sat rotted and scabrous from disuse. Relics, their windows in shards and once-proud faces scabbed and corroded, they were corpses awaiting the blessing of burial.

Sarah parked her car on an old gravel lot that the earth was slowly reclaiming, hunted a minute and found the rip in the chain link fence, right where it was supposed to be. She turned sideways to squeeze through, huddling in her down vest as she moved along a walkway of crumbling concrete, in the shadow of a smokestack.

She found the door that had been jimmied aeons ago, slipped into the abandoned factory. Dim hallways radiated a chill that must have taken years to seep into its walls. Along one, she found a pale rectangle, the ghostly afterimage of some long-removed time clock.

Clay was in the factory's cavernous center, as stilled as the chamber of a dead heart. From somewhere, an office perhaps, he had salvaged the metal framework of a surviving chair, sat surrounded by pits and the huge industrial bones that had once anchored vast machines before they'd been ripped out, sold or scrapped. The silence roared, and beneath it she could almost hear a dim echo of clattering gears.

"Hey. I know you," she said, her voice nearly swallowed, a prayer floating in a cathedral.

"Sarah." Clay sounded surprised, a little curious. Calm, though. Calm was good. She had hoped he would not feel invaded.

"You haven't, like, drawn a line I have to keep outside of, anything like that, have you?"

"No," almost a laugh, and he waved her over.

"Graham told me you come here sometimes." She found a spot on the concrete floor that didn't look too filthy, sat cross-legged. "He drew me a map."

"Better keep it, it may be worth something someday."

"Forgot to get it signed. Stupid, huh?"

His eyebrows nudged upward but he said nothing, as if too polite to agree. She sat looking at him for a few moments. Liked his face, always had. It was nothing unique, as she understood; at least twelve other guys out there had it, too. She had even peeked at the pictures just to see for herself how eerie something like that really was, faces from a hive identity, linked by a strange and darkly wondrous mystery of conception. Still, he made the face his own. Everyone wore their hurts and hungers a little differently.

"What did this place used to be?" She looked up, around. Weak sunlight filtered in from half a dozen skylights and windows.

"I don't know. It was here before I got here, to Denver. I just like to come. It's easier to think here, some reason. Quiet." He shrugged. "I never cared about knowing what they did here before. I don't care what they built. It's just what it is now. When you don't know, it feels like it's always been that way."

Sarah grinned. "Why ruin it, then?"

"Exactly. Look." He pointed, swept an arm from wall to distant wall. They were mottled in shades of gray, washed from ceiling down with accumulated water stains. Mineral traces and contaminants had left abstract patterns. "It looks like cave paintings from the Paleolithic era or something."

"Yeah," she said. "Yeah!" Scanning, embellishing with a tiny push of imagination. She pointed with a mittened hand. "There's a mastodon … and a wild stag."

"And there are the hunters."

"We need a fire," she told him. "And bones. And raw meat."

"Bones," he said, and sighed. Pointed toward the far corner, where shadows clung thickest. "There used to be some over there. Probably not human, but I don't know what. Graffiti too, I think some idiot cult used to come here for sacrifices."

It brought her plunging back, the late twentieth century — oh, that. Sad. Some of the magic fled already. Clay had a point about keeping willfully ignorant of the past.

"Did Adrienne send you after me?" he finally asked.

"It was my idea. But I told her first."

"She wants me back twice a week plus social calls, I guess."

"She'd like that. She thinks it's important. And for whatever my opinion's worth, I think so, too."

She watched the creases deepen across his forehead — this Clay Palmer, the one who stared at water stains on factory walls and saw cave paintings, who looked at them with such yearning he might really want to breathe the air of some primeval dusk and, by the light of fires, scratch pigments into rock. She tried to balance this Clay against the one who had demolished a bar stool in front of the woman she loved.

"Helverson's syndrome," he said. "What do you think caused it?"

Sarah laughed, hopeless, stuck her hands to either side of her head and rubbed furiously. "I don't know. This is *not* my area of expertise."

He smiled down from his chair, swathed inside a faded old army field jacket. "So who's here to know?" Losing his smile; she had noticed they were few and never lasted long. "I mean, we show up just within the last thirty-five years or so, it looks like, all around the world. Got more in common than probably most blood brothers have. I'm not saying it has any meaning … but there's got to be a cause of it."

Probably so. And all the more elusive for the fact that no one could ever know what it was, but could only guess. She tried to hold onto thoughts, conjectures, found them slippery as eels. But her own thoughts she could sort in time. Of greater interest, and importance, was what Clay made of it all.

"Last week Adrienne and I had a session the day before I got those reports. We were talking about the extra chromosome and how maybe it was a spontaneous mutation in some evolutionary way, for some reason. I figured that made as much or more sense as anything. After I got those reports … and after I'd been to your place … I went out and got some books on genetics. I've done a lot of reading on the subject the past week. A *lot*. Did you know that human beings have put about three and a half million new chemicals into the environment, things that don't exist in nature?"

That many? She wished she'd heard him wrong. "No."

Clay nodded. "Most of it's benign, inert, but still, you've got hundreds of thousands of potential mutagens. You know, wrong person gets too close, wrong time, that's it: You've got a misprinted gene. Maybe more. And the thing is, once mistakes go *into* the gene pool, you can't dredge them back out. They'll always be there, repeating through the generations."

Lifeguards at the gene pool, she thought, some strange word association, *that's what we need.*

"But that's not what I wanted to tell you about. Ever hear of the peppered moths in Manchester, England?"

She told him she never had, and he flashed an almost wicked smile: *Oh, you'll love this.*

"For who knows how long, there's been this big population of the peppered moth around Manchester. Up through the middle of the nineteenth century, ninety-nine percent of them were the same color, this pale gray shade, helped them blend with the tree bark so birds couldn't spot them very easily, come in and pick them off, eat them. The other one percent was gray-black. They think it was a mutant strain. But over the next fifty years, the percentages reversed, because during that time England's industrial revolution really got cranking, and around Manchester there were all these factory smokestacks covering the countryside with soot and crap. The trees and everything got darker, and the pale moths, they stood out like blinking lights, just about. The birds didn't *ever* have to skip a meal. But the moths adapted. The mutation took over to darken the species' color so they'd survive. There's even a name for it: industrial melanism. By the time the naturalists figured out what was going on, they realized it was happening everywhere industry was going up. And it wasn't just moths."

Silence; reflection. She was still envisioning moths and smokestacks and the confusion of marauding birds when Clay drew back in his chair, something like embarrassment crossing his face.

"Listen to me," he muttered. "I never used to talk this much. I guess that's one difference Adrienne made in me."

She saw her opportunity. Whether clumsy or not, Sarah knew she had better seize it. "You know, you *could* go back and work on a few more."

He was shaking his head even before she was finished. "I got into those sessions so I could find out about myself, what was wrong, if there

was any hope I could change. Even after they found the extra chromosome I thought there was still hope, that maybe it didn't really make any difference. But I think, deep down, I knew better all along. And nothing against Adrienne, but I learned more from those reports than we ever could've gotten out of psychotherapy."

Sarah rose to her knees, feeling the grit and grime pressing through, and it was as if her own career's self-esteem were riding on this. *Please, please, see that it's for your own good.*

"Can you ever know too much?" she said. "What would it hurt to learn more?"

"There's no *need* for more. I know what I need to know now. I found out what I wanted to know all along." He bent forward, scarred hands twisting at the frayed collar of the field jacket. The look of resignation on his face could have broken the resolve of a priest. "The moths," he said. "The moths were what their world forced them to become. They were a product of their time and place, because that's what they needed to be to survive. I'm not any different, not really. I'm just one of those first fucked-up moths."

Don't say that about yourself, don't condemn yourself to that. It crossed her mind but she was losing her inner voice, her sense of how to plead her case. The worst person to argue with was the one who made more horrible sense than you knew you could. Much as she wanted to believe otherwise, optimism could rarely win against bitter experience.

"Thirteen moths, with the same face," he said, and laughed, a sad and hopeless echo in the chill, from steel and concrete, over the distant drip of pooling water. "I got another envelope from Boston today. Pictures this time. Twelve pictures."

Nineteen

The next day was Thanksgiving, bringing a fine snow that fell for hours in a lazy windless drift. The invitation came from Nina the night before. They usually convened for the major holidays, she told Sarah, because with families elsewhere or estranged or both, they were all the family any of them had.

"Do you want to go?" Sarah asked Adrienne.

"You do, don't you?"

"Well … I guess," trying not to sound too eager, and it hit Adrienne just right, and she began to laugh at such poorly feigned nonchalance, the first real laugh she'd turned loose in a week. Sarah smiled broadly, the inadvertent savior.

"Sure, why not," Adrienne said. "I can't think of anything more depressing than sitting around here and trying to pretend it's just another day."

"That's the Pilgrim spirit."

Nina and Twitch lived in a third-floor walk-up on the fringes of Capitol Hill, above a twenty-four-hour copy shop. They gathered at half past noon, and Sarah quickly sized up that tradition played little role in their celebration, if it could be called that at all — pretty much as she had anticipated. They gave no thanks, offering no prayers because, she surmised, none had much faith that prayers were heard. The menu was piecemeal, each contributing some culinary specialty or two: Uncle Twitch's chili of flaming torments, Nina's baked Jamaican salt-fish and a vegetable stir-fry, couscous and baklava for dessert from Erin. Graham not only brought a Greek salad, but furnished the centerpiece as well, a papier-mâché turkey nailed to a cutting board and opened as if dissected, body cavity stuffed with Monopoly money.

"He makes a different one every year," explained Erin as she circled it with her video camera.

"I'm glad to see he's back in form," said Twitch. "Last year was a disappointment. An Indian drowning in a pumpkin pie, what the hell was

that all about?" He waved his arms in spastic confusion.

Graham stood smoking by the window, staring down three floors to a deserted street. "How many times do I have to explain this to you, Twitch? It wasn't pumpkin, it was *shit*. Who ever heard of putting corn in pumpkin pie?"

"Shit, my ass," said Twitch. "It came out of a can with a label, said Libby's, right on it."

"That's why I put the corn in, idiot, so you could tell the difference." Graham fumed with smoke and friendly disgust. "Give you a simple historical metaphor and it's like you're *still* lost in a forest."

Erin turned her camera on Uncle Twitch, telling Sarah and Adrienne, "He's just still pissed 'cause he cut a piece and tried to eat it."

Twitch frowned, grumbling. "Well, the least he could've done was baked the thing."

"That's when we took a vote," said Nina, touching Adrienne on the wrist. "No more organic centerpieces."

Conspicuous by his absence was Clay, and at least this group was traditional in one respect: They spent much time talking of the one who had failed to make it to the table this year. No one knew what he was doing with his day, and Sarah noticed that the longer they dwelt on him, the less Erin ate, picking at her food, rearranging it with a fork.

"When he called he told me you saw him yesterday," Nina said to Sarah. "How was he?"

"He seemed okay, we must've talked forty or fifty minutes." She slipped a hand beneath the table to Adrienne's leg, and their eyes met. Thinking, *Please don't hold it against me that he opened up to me this time, and I'm not even the authority here, but she did ask.* Saying it all in a glance. Questioning, too: *How far can I go here?*

"It's all right," Adrienne said, mostly sincere, but wasn't it pierced with a sliver of resentment? How could that be helped? "Go ahead."

Sarah squeezed her knee. Maybe Adrienne would see it was fortuitous that Clay had shared with her instead, at this point: Constrained by no oath of confidentiality, Sarah could freely tell these others who had known him for years, people who might help him because he was part of their daily lives.

"On the one hand, it was good to see him stronger than he must've been feeling recently," she said. "But then again there was something painful to watch about it. There was this … I don't know … nihilistic acceptance, I guess, of his condition. Like most of him had just given up to the worst he could believe about it."

"So what's wrong with nihilistic acceptance?" Graham asked. "If you ask me, that sounds like the most honest way to deal with it."

Nina threw her fork down upon her plate. "Because it means he's writing himself off for good, Graham! That's what's wrong with it!"

He arched his eyebrows in a half smirk. "The truth hurts, doesn't it?"

Uncle Twitch paused while dishing out his third helping of couscous. "I looked into nihilism once," he mused, "but there was nothing to it."

Nina paid no attention, leaning over her end of the table. "I really can't believe you sometimes, Graham. I should know better by now, but it always manages to surprise me, just how insensitive you can be. Are you really that nasty inside, or is just some act you think gives you credibility as an artist?"

He clasped his hands in mock admiration. "Very good, *most* impressive, very insightful. Especially for a junior college dropout." Graham turned to Adrienne. "You're the professional, how did she score?"

Sarah watched Adrienne draw a thin breath. "Not that I'm diagnosing, you understand, but actually," speaking with cool surgical precision, "she may have a point."

Graham had not expected this, clearly, and Sarah watched the minute narrowing of one eye. Aching with him in some small touch of empathy, even though he had invited it on himself. *Yes, I know what it's like to hope for an ally who refuses the job. Ask me and I'll tell you about a big brother who denies he has a sister just because she likes women.*

Graham chose to ignore it, like a wounded animal that might grow only more vicious. "It has nothing to do with being twisted or insensitive, it's being honest enough to admit that if you know you have nothing better to look forward to, why not at least embrace that much? We're each alone enough as it is, and for sure we die that way. Is it that threatening to you to admit it?"

Adrienne rested her chin on clenched fingers. "And Buddha said, 'I am awake.'"

"You're not alone, Graham," said Erin. "You do have me."

"Half-alone, then."

Nina was looking at Uncle Twitch, throwing her hands in the air. "Why do I invite him? Why do I keep inviting him? He's like a solar eclipse!"

Twitch frowned. "Well, would you rather talk about your mom's hysterectomy?"

Nina turned back toward Graham. "Not everybody shares your conviction that nothing out there in the universe loves us."

He began to laugh. "I didn't notice you bowing *your* head when we sat around the table."

"It doesn't mean I don't believe in something." And Nina began to slip down into her chair, her ideological footing clearly less sure here. Sarah thinking, *No, don't back off now, you were doing so well.* Nina bit her lip. "I mean … I'm not all that comfortable calling it God, like that, but … something's there."

"Oh, there's a God, all right," said Erin, staring glumly at her plate. She speared a lettuce leaf. "The bad news is, She's got PMS."

It continued like that throughout the rest of the meal, then dessert. Discussion that often grew heated, but never quite savage enough to draw blood, and Sarah wondered if it were not, simply enough, their way. That if in their world, their lives, given their backgrounds, this was the manner in which they assured one another they mattered and that the ultimate expression of dislike came not in barbed words, but indifference. Prickly though it may have been at times, she saw something cohesive about their little unit.

Graham grew increasingly quiet, smoking by the window and staring through the veil of snow to the street, watching the occasional car that slowed. Twitch went clicking up and down the television channels, despairing of football, and above it they could barely hear Erin, vomiting in the bathroom. Adrienne asked if she did that often, and Twitch shrugged, saying, "Well, it *is* a holiday."

They soon fought, Erin and Graham — over what, Sarah could not tell, but she wondered if it might not have something to do with Clay. Probably it would have been better had he been here. Somehow it could be

so much less threatening to compete with flesh and blood, than a phantom present only in conversation.

Sarah's eyes met Graham's once, as Erin grabbed her video camera and cradled it as tenderly as a child, as she threatened to leave, and before he could turn away, Sarah noticed the shimmer of tears in his eyes. Soon they retired to the privacy of Twitch and Nina's bedroom, and she heard one low sob as someone cried, not sure who it was, and then for a long while could hear nothing at all. She supposed that was good, hoping it meant they were just quiet lovers, more vocal in their depression than in their ardor.

The four of them left to carry on with Thanksgiving drank wine, Uncle Twitch proving to have an unexpected gift for spices and flame, as he first mulled it with cloves and cardamom seeds and cinnamon sticks. They sat about the living room and ignored the TV, pleasantly lethargic now that the worst of the psychodrama appeared to have been played out.

Nina moved across the room to sit on the couch as Sarah took the floor, so Nina could weave her hair into a curtain of long thin braids. Nina's fingers were soft, warm, deft, the gentle tug and pull soothing. She could sleep like this, some echo of childhood surrender into the total security of two hands. Hoping only that Adrienne would not take it wrong; it was not *that* kind of surrender. She would store this tactile arousal until they got home, could get a fire lit — a fire would be divine — and she would make love with Adrienne for hours. Flushed and firm, their bodies would glow, and they would be flawless. Firelight smoothed over every blemish. Perhaps it was this magic luster, above even heat and light, that made fire such an object of primordial veneration.

Eyes too heavy to open, she groped to find Adrienne's hand, held it while the sun died beyond the windows and the snow whispered cold promises.

"I wish he'd been here today," said Uncle Twitch, with a reflectiveness born of wine. "He should've been here."

Adrienne stirred. "Clay?"

"Who else."

And she smiled, a wistful little smile that Sarah saw upon opening her eyes.

"I've been sitting here turning it over and over, what bothers me about everyone being so willing to concede defeat, Clay most of all, over that

goddamned chromosome. You know what it is? It's the superstition." Adrienne drew knees toward chin, wrapped both arms around them. "We've haven't really gotten over spilled salt and broken mirrors, just replaced them with stranger things we can't explain. So we're afraid of them. As long as the technology holds up, we'll always have that shadow just on the other side of understanding."

"And poor Clay had to find a big one inside himself," Nina said.

"He'll deal with it," said Twitch. "I don't think we give him enough credit sometimes." He held arms open wide as Nina, finished with Sarah's hair, sank into his lap, and they held each other. "He deals with some of the most god-awful stuff but always comes out of it. I think we need him more than he needs us. I look at him sometimes, and think, well, if he can get through, I guess I can too."

Nina nodded into his chest. "Graham needs him most."

Sarah roused from her dreamy languor. "So the rest of you find him inspiring?"

"He's still alive, isn't he?"

Twitch nodded. "He reduces a lot of his life to fundamentals and doesn't miss the frills. I envy the hell out of him for that." His eyes seemed to pinch as he nuzzled distractedly into Nina's hair, something eating at him: all the things he wanted for Nina and himself, perhaps, wanted and might never admit; all the things he wanted to give her and could never afford. "For a long time I had this romantic notion about poverty. For everything out there I looked at and knew I didn't want any part of, it seemed that trying to live the impoverished artist's life was the most honest thing I could do. That's okay when you're twenty-two, you can get away with it then. But thirty-one…?" Clinging to Nina. "It was just one more hollow icon, wasn't it?"

Nina was stroking his beard, his ponytail. "You'll find what you want to do, you'll find it." Trying to smile. She could be so brave, if only she had a cause. "We'll find what we're good at."

Sarah hated herself for her first thought. *No, no, you probably won't, but I don't think it's your fault, it's just that no one bothered teaching you how to recognize it when you see it.*

They stayed for another hour, then went down to the street and scraped the snow from the car. Sarah stood in the chill, face tilted to the sky,

until a nugget of sadness felt cleansed. And in the car Adrienne kissed her, told her she liked the braids, and said that all in all, this Thanksgiving had the edge over the last one she had been forced to spend with in-laws; so think about that.

Twenty

He would never have admitted it to anyone, but sometimes Valentine wondered if he wasn't a better man for having lost his testicles. Really. Looking back before the cancer, he wondered how much time he had spent just trying to protect them, relieve them, meet their incessant demands. They could be worse than even the worst children he could imagine, because *those* little monsters you could at least ship away for a weekend, or even walk out on the rest of their lives. With gonads, you had no options.

Naturally, he had mourned their loss. Years of anguish and grieving it had taken, but eventually he had realized it was like being liberated from, well, a ball and chain.

It had bestowed upon his mind a clarity of vision he had never known outside of dreams. He could track a line of thought and wring from it all he hungered for. Without that distracting flood of hormones, ideas came to him like smiles from the gods.

Like this game. This new game. This indulgence. The old fantasy had continued to burn strong enough to force him to seek a compromise, making of it a variation on a very old theme, but even this middle ground had unique thrills all its own.

One gun, a Colt Python .357 revolver. One bullet, hollow point. Which chamber in the cylinder? He would leave it to chaos to sort out those one-in-six odds.

When the moment was right.

He met Teddy where Boston met the Bay, along the wharves and the plaza before the New England Aquarium. Teddy the family man — stand downwind of him when he belched and you could catch a whiff of yesterday's meals. A numbing Atlantic wind swept in off the water, encountered the city's first rank of buildings, and whipped itself into confusion. It roared, nature's scream at mankind's impudence.

"Think you could've picked someplace windier?" Teddy cried above the gale. It made a wreck of the careful sculpting he did to conceal early

pattern baldness. "I hear at MIT, they got this wind tunnel, check aerodynamics, that kind of shit."

"Let's go in, let's look at the fish," Valentine said.

They crossed the plaza, leaning into the wind, while out in the harbor it chopped the water into low whitecaps. Farther out, a pair of freighters chugged and rolled against a horizon gray as iron.

Friday afternoon and the aquarium was doing slow business. The day after Thanksgiving, most of the human herd had holiday shopping on their minds. Couldn't wait to spend their money, feed the machine, instead of learning about these creatures that owned the other seventy percent of the world.

They strolled past exhibit tanks, stocked with fish from the North Atlantic to the South Pacific, glassed-in replicas of their home seas. Floating along with rippling gills, or nosing the glass to peer out at the fragmentary world on the other side, sometimes those fish looked wiser than most people he had met.

"Look at that one," said Teddy, pointing. "Looks like Bob Hope, doesn't he?"

Present company included, Valentine feared. But Teddy was a good employee, and there was business to do, the sort of business it was never wise to discuss over telephones.

"What's the status on the Alabama shipment?" he asked.

"Lydell says he'll have the last of the M16s converted by tonight. I got a van and driver lined up to run them down from his place to the Chelsea drop until the launchers get here." Teddy maneuvered back and forth before a tank of lionfish and checked his reflection; couldn't quit worrying about that hair. "Sunday at the latest on those. Breckton says he made the payoff and got the armory keys last night."

They took their time along a coral reef and went over the logistics of moving the shipment south. Frequently, the real money to be made from selling arms wasn't so much in the merchandise itself, but in its transportation. For smaller shipments such as this, he liked small vans, because they attracted little attention on the highway; but the big problem with vans was that, once loaded with all that ordnance, they rode down low on their shocks. State troopers noticed that sort of thing, so the suspensions had to be rebuilt ahead of time.

It was a panic shipment all the way: white supremacists in the thick of Alabama, sure their world was close to caving in. They had committed nearly all of their war chest to a shipment of M16s to be converted to full automatic fire, and M79 grenade launchers with crates of both smokers and explosive rounds. Valentine had already been able to lay hands on the cream of their order: four Gustav 84-mm recoilless rifles, originally designed to penetrate a Soviet main battle tank at up to 400 meters, and enough to inflict grievous fuckage on any armored vehicle that any federal agency might roll onto their compound.

They expected this as a matter of due course. Everybody had an Armageddon hard-wired to *some* damn timetable — these backwoods lads because they'd been unable to control one of their own.

The incident had made national news three weeks ago, each network trumpeting it as Exhibit A of national disgrace and more proof positive of a barbarous age. Valentine remembered it well, having savored every telecast. A bigot named Hardy Sutton had, late one night, drunkenly run his car off the road and into a swiftly flowing creek. Drowning amid the beer cans would have been imminent, had a passing motorist driving home from the late shift not stopped to dive in and pull him to dry ground.

Afterward, Sutton had apparently been unable to live with himself, knowing his rescuer had been black. Co-workers reported behavior of a man in rapid deterioration. Within the week, Sutton had taken a small submachine pistol and not only killed his savior, but also wiped out the rest of the man's family before reserving the final trigger pull for his own head. A trace on the weapon pointed a finger back to members of an Aryan resistance faction.

Some people simply could not withstand a challenge to their preconceptions, for which Valentine was eternally appreciative. It led to a more interesting world. And people spent billions to give muscle to their hatreds.

Once he and Teddy had the details worked out, Teddy decided to skip out on the rest of the aquarium, and Valentine continued alone. His topcoat hung well-fitted to his frame, and he walked slowly, back straight, every step smooth and deliberate. Hands in his coat pockets, the right one caressing the Python revolver.

On one of the aquarium's many levels was an exhibit known as "The Edge of the Sea" — rocks and shallow water, like a small tidal pool. They kept it stocked with durable, crusty little creatures, while an employee stood by encouraging curious visitors to pick them up, examine, learn. Kids loved it.

Here Valentine lingered, standing a couple of feet behind a father and two grade-schoolers, a boy and a girl. It smelled like a long custody weekend — Dad's got the kids, got to make every moment count or they would hate him one day. With the kids' attention distracted, Dad had that look of sad, weary panic: *Am I doing the right thing, are they having fun?*

Inside his roomy pocket, Valentine maneuvered the revolver, trained it on Dad's back. Thumbed back the hammer, heard a click too soft for anyone else's ears, like a whispered secret.

One bullet, the cylinder spun more than an hour ago, waiting like a stilled roulette wheel the dealer had yet to check.

Blond-haired boy, braces already, holding up a horseshoe crab and wiggling it in his sister's face. She only laughed.

Valentine's hand, slick on the grip — if this moment could only last forever. The anticipation, the perfect and delicious element of random chance, a stranger selected on a moment's whim, with a one-in-six chance of a magnum bullet tearing his spine in two. He might even live to appreciate the irony.

Finger, tightening on the trigger…

Mass murder, the old fantasy, would never do. With this substitute, the prelude was all. Valentine had decided he would allow himself one day per month, one spin of the cylinder, one random target who would never realize what the smiling, well-dressed stranger had in his pocket. And when everything was perfect, one pull of the trigger. Such strict discipline. Like letting the demons out of their boxes, but making sure all they had was a day pass.

He squeezed the trigger —

— and heard the click as the hammer fell on an empty chamber.

He shut his eyes and took a deep breath, his skin tingling, heart soaring, bowels loose and free of knots.

Fine. This took care of November. He would not be greedy.

Valentine continued on his way, up to the top level, then descended the ramp that spiraled down around the 180,000-gallon ocean tank in the center of the aquarium. He and the sharks just inches from each other.

Who would it be next month, he wondered, and what was he doing at this very instant? Or she? Neither of them even knowing the other existed, Valentine sure only that their paths would cross the day after Christmas. Perhaps next time he would even look his choice in the face while playing the game. And perhaps not.

Knowing only that no one could ever say he did not have the balls to pull the trigger.

*

Before he went home late that afternoon, Valentine dropped by to see Ellie. Ellie would surely be home. She rarely went out during daylight, stating with indifference that she didn't like the sun, but he suspected it was more phobic than she let on. He had been around her two or three times when she was drugged, something she'd picked up on the streets, and once she had whimpered for an hour about skin tumors.

He kept her in fine style, a business-district penthouse that was even nicer than his Charlestown home, or would be if she took enough trouble to keep it up. Certainly more than Ellie was used to, or had any right to expect, but he supposed the place was just as much for himself as her. From nineteen floors up, the streets and everything in them were just things to frown down at, turn your back on. For the right price, anyone could feel like royalty.

Ellie let him in, and he said little for the longest time, content to sit with her on opposite sides of the living room and watch some game show on TV. He sank back into the plush depth of a sectional sofa, kicked his feet up on a coffee table whose top was a thick slab of gray and black marble. He could still remember when the surface held a reflection, now so smudged and dusty the shine was a memory. Two bags of taco chips were going stale on it at the moment.

"When's the last time you washed your hair?" he finally had to ask.

Ellie shot him a look and shrugged. "When was the last full moon?"

So she was in one of those moods. With some effort she might be a little shy of beautiful. Instead, she settled for striking, which didn't necessarily connote the same thing. Her skin was a creamy alabaster; her

hair electric with a deep violet rinse, hitting her at the shoulder blades, on the sides razored to stubble in a sidewall over each ear. He supposed some guys would find that a turn-on, a kind of urban pagan allure. He supposed, too, that it was probably a generational thing, and he was simply too old to appreciate it.

Barely twenty-two and she'd lucked into what surely was a prime arrangement for someone like her. Found a sugar daddy who didn't care what she did with her time, expected no favors for himself, demanded only that she practice safe extracurricular sex if she practiced it at all. He'd become a fanatic on the subject; didn't want to have to be procuring any abortions. That could louse up all kinds of plans and timetables.

He had come to believe that, if he'd had a daughter, this was the way he would feel about her.

Valentine had no children, at least none that he'd ever been told of, from the era that had ended more than a decade ago, when he had been shackled by the same drives as any man. His cradle of seed had then metastasized into something foul, and so the idea of children was now academic, at least in a biological sense.

But fate, destiny, evolution — these could give a man children no less his own than those from his loins.

From a shirt pocket he slid out a picture and flipped it into Ellie's lap. Looking at it with downcast eyes, she let nearly a minute tick by before touching it, turning it right-side up.

"Which is this one?" she asked. "They all look alike to me."

"Daniel Ironwood. He's the one in Seattle." Valentine watched her go over the picture with mild appraisal, milder interest. "He's nice-looking enough. Do you like him?"

Ellie shrugged. "He's all right. He's coming here?"

"In a few weeks. Right after Christmas. I talked to him a couple of days ago, and that's when he thought he could get away."

She dropped the picture to the floor beside her chair, aimed the remote to boost the television volume. *"In 1628 this British physician published his treatise, 'On the Movement of the Heart and Blood in Animals'..."*

"Who is William Harvey," she said, and looked down at the picture again. "You know, Patrick, who I think I could really go for is Mark Alan

Nance. There's a look in his eyes I get off on."

"It's called waiting to die," he told her. "There's a lot I can do, but arranging a conjugal visit to death row in Texas isn't one of them."

"What is *The Mikado*," she said to the TV. Then, to him, "If you can do so much, why don't you get me on this show? I bet I could clean up."

"I'm guessing that *doesn't* refer to your hair."

"Har har." Ellie rolled her eyes. "Who were the Cathars."

He listened to her volley back and forth with the television, decided against opening his mouth when he knew an answer, because, frankly, she looked to be edging him out by a two-to-one margin. This was embarrassing. Better she be left in the dark as to how much he knew, or didn't.

Ellie stretched, arms fisted high, legs out stiff before her, stocking feet wiggling. Then she curled back into the chair. "Now that geek from Indianapolis, now there was a disappointment. You let that happen to me again, Patrick, and I don't care how good I have it here, I'm not doing it any more."

He told her sure, sure, he understood. Well, it had been an unqualified fiasco, and he'd tried to tell himself that Timothy Van der Leun must have had more problems beyond Helverson's syndrome. Some irritating vein of guilt morality beaten into him since birth, maybe. He was, after all, a preacher's son; lots of damage potential there.

"What about the new guy, that Clay guy?" she asked.

"What about him?"

"Are you going to bring him here?"

"What's the rush? I just found out about him the first part of this month. I'm not going to push it before it's time, if that's what you're driving at. Backfired on me once, with that one from L.A. I'll take an extra two or three months if that's what it takes to keep it from happening again."

That was the problem with the young: their impatience, their need to get things done posthaste, forget the groundwork. It wasn't their fault, though. He recognized signs of their conditioning by a world trapped in hyperacceleration. Children reached puberty a full three years earlier today than they did at the time of the American Revolution. He envisioned a massive social vise, squeezing tighter and tighter these malleable young bodies and minds. Such resilience, though. They found their ways to cope,

to survive; to thrive, even. And for the very lucky few, biology had found it for them.

What a prophet Nietzsche had proven to be, a century before his time. If only the man had lived to see his concept of the *übermensch*, the superman destined to rise above the human herd, take form as a biological edict.

If only the man were here now, to seek out as one might seek a guru, for wisdom. Their strained and wretched lives, these first growing pains of a genetic monarchy taking its first wobbly steps toward the throne, might be given succor, balm, and meaning.

He liked to think so, anyway.

"Well, *that* was an easy eighteen grand I could've made," said Ellie, and she clicked off the television with a snap and flourish of the remote. Smiling at him as she dropped the remote atop the picture on the floor, a vicious little smile that made his skin crawl, made him want to batter it from her face.

Ellie slithered from the chair down to the floor, advancing toward the sectional on all fours, swaying side to side like a predator in torn black tights, white skin luminous through the rips. A panther, stalking slowly and willfully, eyes cruel in their curiosity; violet hair hanging before her face; she blew a lock of it off her cheek with a sharp and feral gust.

"Why not you, Patrick?" saying it soft, saying it low, as she palmed both hands over his knees. "What's your secret, why so chaste around me? Nobody ever got a madonna vibe off me." Sliding her hands higher along his thighs.

He caught her wrists and held them; thin little twigs, he could have broken each. And twenty years ago, might have broken her wrists and flipped her over; he'd have torn her clothing free and made her regret she had ever thought of seducing him. Shown her what seduction had brought — the beast that, once awakened, could not be put back in its cage.

But twenty years could change a lot, cancer even more. The same name but hardly the same man, the Patrick Valentines of then and now connected primarily by strands of DNA.

"I like whores," he said. "You're not a whore."

They did have their merits. Anonymity, and the assurance that you never had to look the same one in the eye again if you'd rather not. And you

could pay them to never, ever mention that they noticed your deformity. Actresses in the end, they could lay a hand on you and pretend you were whole. Their faces would never betray the shocks that would cause a normal woman to snatch her hand back as if defiled by a malignant void. Whores were just dandy that way.

And Ellie laughed.

"Then what do you call me?" she asked, drawing back, not one visible wound from the rejection; just a game she played. So little real power she possessed, but that she did, she was certainly aware of. "I mean, you're paying all the bills here, it makes me something."

She was right. Although he had yet to decide upon the term.

Twenty-One

These were the most unlikely of missives, and would take serious contemplation to assimilate into his worldview.

Had he believed in any thinking power greater than himself, this could have been a guardian angel come to his aid.

Had he believed in prayer, this might have been an answer.

But Clay believed in neither — so what other than a fluke could it be? He had a Boston postmark and nothing else, an entire city in which to plant his imaginings … who it must be, and why, and how this relayer had come by the information that Adrienne and her backers thought too sensitive to let him in on.

He had at first suspected it to be more of their chicanery: We'll poke him this way, see how he responds. But it had continued as if according to a deliberate agenda, heedless of his reaction, by someone who might not even have a means of gauging it. Tantalizing rations of information, one envelope per week with something new. First the general overviews, then the pictures. This week, case studies of the five North American Helverson's subjects known before he had been tagged as number six. Keep this up, before long he would be as informed as Adrienne. Maybe more so.

Maybe that was the plan.

He could face the east, as if toward Mecca, and come close to sensing some distant kindred heart, beating in a stranger's chest. *Who are you and how do you know my name, how do you know my aberration?*

And just what does it matter to you?

Whoever it was, this person had touched his life from across the country, and while no name had yet been shared, in a sense he felt a little less alone, and far less dependent on psychotherapy. He had been snipped free from the bureaucratic umbilical cord of a think tank in a desert city into which he had wandered by chance. He didn't need them anymore.

He had *this*.

And Clay realized why he could not believe in angels: They were obsolete. What was their job but to bring information, to herald

announcements? Now they had been bettered. The messengers of the information age had fiber-optic wings; their chariots, jets filled with sacks of airmail; their trumpet knell from the sky, now the programming of satellites in orbit. The angels had fallen, clipped and shorn.

And if it would have been nice to believe in the comfort of their radiant presence, the welcome rustle of their wings, rather than in the cold hard hum of technology, at least the latter was dependable. It required no more than the touch of a button, and was there whether he believed in it or not.

Go ahead, he directed toward the east, more than a thought, not quite a whisper. *You started this, now finish it. You know what I am, and whoever you are, you probably don't know why I'm this way any better than I do … but can you at least tell me if I can be anything more…?*

Or if this is all there is, all there ever will be. All there ever can *be.*

Save me.

While the anger at a world he had not asked to join — not in this mutant body, at least — often seemed too much, more and more it seemed as if it simply were not enough.

*

She came into the apartment the way she had come into his life a few years back — quietly, hesitantly, even sadly, and Clay supposed his first thought was but an echo of an earlier one, maybe even the very first thing he had thought about her: *She looks broken.*

Footsteps soft and small across the floor — she was walking as if even her legs had been snapped and were not to be trusted. No video camera with her for a change, both arms busy hugging across her front. Erin shed her coat, then sank onto the couch beside him and they were bathed in the news anchor's chatter from the TV. She remained so still he had to check to make sure she was breathing.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Her hair straggled like yellowed weeds from beneath her hat. "What do I smell like?"

Clay frowned, almost laughed. Finally bent close enough to put his nose to her, where Erin's slim neck curved into shoulder.

"Soap," he said. "Shampoo."

Oh, she seemed to mouth, full lips pale, pressing together. When she looked at him, her face could have been no more naked had she been skinned alive.

"Is that all?"

He tried again and got nothing, nothing more than the city through which she had come, the city and the cold. She smelled of December, but didn't they all?

"I think so," he said. "Is there something I missed?"

No answer, just Erin, Erin on a winter's evening as a chill gripped the attic apartment the way it always did when dusk turned black. Thin veins of frost rimed the windows, and she went to one such web, as if drawn, hypnotized. She looked at the frost as a jumper looks at a ledge; it became her entire world. She scraped a fingertip along the pane, a white crescent of ice thickening beneath her nail.

"Sometimes," she said without turning, "sometimes I think every man should have a gay experience. Taking … taking the passive role. Just once, as long as he remembers it. Remembers what it's like to have *his* body invaded."

Sinking by the window then, down on her haunches and her head lowered into arms that were already pretzeled about her body; she turned halfway and tumbled back against the wall but barely made a noise, as if she weren't really there. Posed for too many pictures, maybe, each one slicing away a few more layers of cells — a specimen donor for voyeurs' fantasies.

When she raised her face, Erin's eyes were red and her mouth was stretched wide. "What's wrong with me?" she screamed. "I can't even cry anymore! I tried for an hour and the tears wouldn't come and I want them to, *I want my tears back!*"

He remained on the couch where she had left him, staring from across the living room. This would be how deer feel in headlights, snared by some approaching sensory overload, petrified and about to die for it.

He should go to her — Clay knew it as surely as he knew the scars on the back of his hand. He should touch her if she wanted to be touched, hold her if she wanted to be held, kiss her if she wanted to be kissed. It should be automatic. He shouldn’t even have to think about this, because where did thinking get him? Got him to realizing just how many broken parts he must

really have inside, and maybe he'd shattered them all himself over the years, in one fit of rage after another, until nothing was left.

Slit me open, he thought, *and would I even feel it then…?*

Feel enough to connect them? Or would Erin find nothing more inside than a coagulated mass of scar tissue, so thick it defeated even the knife?

"What happened?"

"Tell me the truth." She sounded so desperate to hear it. If she could hold onto words, her clenched fists would burst them like watery boils. "Just tell me the truth. Am I ugly? Do you think I'm ugly?"

Shaking his head: "No." How could she even wonder? Never had he known her to exhibit the slightest insecurity about her looks, even when they were her stock-in-trade. Shedding her clothes came as easily as others found removing their shoes. He had always assumed if there were any doubts, she had locked them deep within, and built walls around the locks, and posted guards to protect the walls. He had thought her impregnable.

As secured as Troy.

"Liar!" she cried, as she curled onto her side on the floor, beneath the window. "Don't let me down now, you shit. If there was one thing I could respect most about you, it was that you were always brutally honest. Don't you even know how rare that is, how much it's meant to me?"

Turning his hands up, shaking his head. "You're not ugly, I never found you ugly." But why couldn't he go the extra mile? Why did his throat constrict around the rest, *why* couldn't he tell her she was beautiful?

For so long he had felt aged, even ancient at times, as worn and cracked as old leather. Yet he felt too young now, as ineffectual as a child, three feet off the floor and watching as towering parents battled it out with fists and whipcrack words meant to hurt where fists could never reach. *Don't fight, don't fight,* the only thing a child can say; he was no more qualified now to intercede in misery than he must have been twenty years ago.

Don't hurt, Erin. Don't hurt.

She drew a breath between clenched teeth, smoothed a phantom tear away from the corner of her eye. "I remember, I was eight, I think. There was some stupid citywide kids' beauty contest I heard about at school, all these other girls were entering and I thought I wanted to, too. You can laugh if you want, the idea of me being interested in something like that."

Clay shook his head. He had never considered Erin as a child. Never thought of her as tiny, impressionable, innocent.

"You're not laughing." She sniffed, did it for him. "I asked my mother about it and she told me to ask my father. I asked him and he told me no, he wasn't about to waste thirty-five dollars on the entry fee, not when I could never win."

He watched her tremble for a moment, face half-hidden by a spill of hair, the visible half more than he wanted to see. A small sympathetic spasm rippled through his center and he dug fingernails into knees to stop it.

"Why do they do those things to us, Clay? Why do they do things like that?"

"There's…" he said, trying to find words. "There's some other way?"

He tried to move, succeeded only in sliding off the couch onto the floor, on the same level as she but a room and chasms away. He thought to try to reach — it was a small room — but his arm would still fall short. He was sinking, drowning in the same chilly air he had breathed all day, would breathe all night, would breathe all his life.

"I did another layout today," she said, "and they wanted me to look ugly. Scared and ugly. They posed me with five guys this afternoon, all of them at once, and they were, they were … they were…" Erin went through some kind of contortion, as if she were retching without sound, with nothing emerging; dry heaving her soul. "I could smell them sweating under the lights, and they were … they were in me, everyplace, and holding me down, I couldn't even breathe anymore, and every time the photographer would yell for me to look more scared or more ugly, they'd … they'd all just *laugh*. And do me harder, all of them, in this weird rhythm they got into, like they were some kind of group machine or something." Voice breaking into a sobbing wail, "*This morning I got up thinking I was going to* like *it, that I'd have fun with it!* But it was like they didn't even need me! I'd always, I'd always, I'd always tell myself these other people, they weren't sex partners, but … but this is the first time anybody's ever made *me* feel that way, like I was nothing to *them*. Why did it have to be *different this time*?"

Clay had no answer, not even the beginnings of one. Thinking, *But Adrienne would,* then dismissing it immediately.

"Why do I feel all the wrong things, the things I don't want to feel and not the things I *do*?" Erin pushed the hair from her face and slowly sat up, back against the wall, arms wrapped around her knees to turn her into a tight little ball.

He watched her raise her eyes to him, plaintive eyes, eyes of a beggar seeking scraps at a back door: whatever you can spare. *I should go to her —*

A sound, then, like the breaking of a violin string in the middle of a pitifully beautiful solo: her voice: "Why won't you hold me, Clay?"

Hold her? *Hold her?* He could not even answer her.

"Sometimes I just want you to … to…" Shaking her head in defeat.

"Why didn't you go to Graham's tonight instead?"

Erin snapped her head up as if she had been slapped, fresh hurt washing down her face. And while her nose could run, still she shed no tears. "Graham? I couldn't tell this to Graham. I'd tell him about this afternoon and it'd be like digging his heart out with a fork. If I did that to him I'd hate myself even more."

He almost smiled at that. Erin, as wretched as she felt, still managing to brush the dust off something close to altruism. Perhaps she deserved better than either him or Graham, only no one knew it, least of all her.

"Please hold me!" she cried. *"Please!"* And how expectantly she waited, suddenly poised and tense, just waiting for something other than herself around which she could throw her arms. Her empty arms.

The body, the mind — how strange when the former freezes up, and the latter seems at its peak. Had he really been this way since birth, his priorities hopelessly awry? He had never been afraid to hurt. Hurt was so dependable it seemed natural, the only thing anyone could count on. It was pleasure that seemed suspect. Maybe because, once it diminished, as it inevitably had to, the hurt seemed even more powerful, twice as real as before.

When they grew tired of looking at each other in their stalemate, neither making the first move, Erin got up and slowly shrugged on her coat and, without a word, left him slumped in the spot that had claimed him for its own…

Thereby proving him right.

He still might have been wrong, might have touched her and found that to be close was not such a prickly thorn after all. But better to err on the

side of caution.

*

He tried to drink but even the taste was venom. Three shots of vodka and he was clinging to the kitchen sink while the lining of his stomach nearly turned inside out. He was recalcitrant when it came to feeling? This he could feel just fine, every contracting fiber of gut muscle.

Clay tried calling her later, but never a human pickup, just Erin's answering machine. He almost left a message on the fifth attempt, but again slammed the receiver back down when he tried to speak and found he had no words to suit him. The failure got less shameful as he went along.

Maybe she was there, curled beneath a blanket in the dark, counting each abortive call. Or maybe she was at Graham's.

He smashed the bottle of vodka but it did not help; followed suit with three plates, then sat among the shards and carved on himself with one, watched the blood ooze down his arm; hung his head and found he had a few tears in reserve even if Erin had none. This much breaking of glass — used to be, he could count on his downstairs neighbors to bang on their ceiling, call out for him to knock off the noise, but no more. He wondered if they were now afraid of him.

He knew what the problem was. Knew exactly what the fucking problem was. They'd had him on lithium since late September, and why he was still taking it he didn't know. More than two weeks since he'd relieved Adrienne of her duties and still he was popping the pills like daily communion. He supposed he had faith in them to some degree: *Lithium is my shepherd, I shall not kill.*

No more, though. It was dulling him inside, suffocating his one chance at anything like love and grace in the world. They prescribed it because they *wanted* him alone; he would be easier to study that way.

When he flushed them away, he thought the act should at least make him feel better than it actually did.

Facing himself in the mirror, he saw the smudgy dark circles beneath his eyes, the thin scar over the left. Remembering when he had stood here and taken the twelve stitches out himself. No doctor would get near his eyes with scissors if he could help it.

Maybe he needed a job, something to fill his days. Certainly the need would be upon him eventually. He had squirreled away five thousand in

savings from his stint as a garbage man. Fine for now, but it wouldn't last through spring. A job, something mindless, like the rest of them, Nina and Twitch and Graham, working below their abilities but above their interest. A job…?

No, it would never be enough.

I have to get out of here, he thought. Breathe other air and purge the lithium from his system, maybe he could return in a few days and be better for Erin; be real. If those assholes in Tempe hadn't wanted his wallet, maybe he could have achieved an epiphany months ago; burned himself blind in the Arizona desert and vomited out every bitter root he had been fed since birth. Dragged himself home half-alive, but at least that half would have been worth the effort it took just to live.

He would try, try again, and if he could have furthered the cause by praying to anything he believed might answer, he would have done that, too.

He could pray toward the east, toward his guardian messenger.

But no — that was just one more vessel in which to misplace faith that would probably turn out to disappoint. They all did, in the end.

*

North this trip, a direction only a fool would take this time of year, but fools could be mad and could even be holy, and the paths of holy madmen led somewhere.

He would find one such path — he *had* to.

Unburdened by his car, on foot as seemed proper, Clay wore layers of clothes and carried only what fit in the pockets of his heavy field jacket. He trekked across the city for an hour and blocked out its roar with his Walkman tape player and earphones. The night was cold against his face but at least it was dry, and finally he caught a bus, boarding it in a swirling cloud of diesel stink and riding with fellow passengers who lived in their tiny islands of air and met no one's eyes. He rode as far north as he could, then got off and trudged several blocks to the highway.

Three in the morning and he caught a lift with an eighteen-wheeler. Anyone hitching in December must need the ride. Might be crazy, but not dangerous crazy, or so the driver told Clay.

Rolling through the night, the ribbon of highway far below, with a billion cold pinprick stars overhead. He had burned before, so maybe this

trip he should freeze. He would turn west eventually, climb as far into the mountains as he could, feel them rise majestic and savage beneath his feet, and the sooner, the better. It had become an urgent need to stand dwarfed by trees that grew as plentiful as grass, and between earth and stars, bare himself to a roaring winter wind that would try to strip him naked and turn him blue. Perhaps he could survive only minutes, seconds even — but the seconds would be his. His tonic. His truth.

If it left him nothing but his name, turned the rest of him into a blank scoured clean by wind and ice and snow, perhaps that might be best. He could try building again.

Around four, the driver veered into the rest stop before the Fort Collins turnoff to catch a nap before continuing, so Clay went striding across the lot with half a moon in the west, half a beacon, as all around him the big rigs grumbled like restless sleepers, snorting and farting into the sky. Diesel fumes burned his nose and he trudged into the silent rest stop, locked himself in a stall, and, sitting on the toilet, managed to sleep until an hour past dawn.

Clay hoofed west into Fort Collins. The sun was up and baked the night's chill out of the earth. Beneath his clothes he finally broke sweat. Fort Collins was a college town, he had been here before but couldn't recall why; thought it was a lot like Boulder, only less self-conscious about what it was and was not.

An oasis on the edge of the mountains — here he spent the rest of the morning, on into the afternoon. Found a sandwich shop where he passed two hours pouring down coffee and silencing the dull hollow in his belly, reading the local free weeklies just so he looked as if he had something to do. Liking the feel of it all — the vagabond life really did suit him at times. He could watch the students who were wrapping up their semester and see the sleepless tension in their eyes, and felt like the freest man in town. Plenty of knowledge to go around, but did they really know how to think? A lot did not, he suspected, else they wouldn't be here, so ready to sacrifice themselves just to be content with such meager crumbs of lives once they were finished. No one to hire them and nothing to do.

Late afternoon, he ducked off a side street into a music store, *We Sell New And Used*, little hole-in-the-wall shop that smelled of dusty album jackets and earlier incense, with walls half-papered over with do-it-yourself

announcements. Clay prowled the shelves of cassettes, missing Erin in a way he had not thought possible. Whatever it was they had, last night he might have wrecked it without saying a word, *because* he'd not said a word, not any words that really mattered.

Don't hurt, Erin. And don't hate me because I don't know how to keep you from it.

He found what he was looking for, a few tapes by Gene Loves Jezebel. All the same to him, he didn't really know their music, but Erin loved them; knew titles, lyrics, everything; they were a perennial favorite and that was good enough. He could play this through his Walkman and let it work whatever magic it might; make it easier for him to feel the space at his side was a little less empty.

He selected one of the tapes by merit of artwork alone, took it to the counter and slid it to the guy on duty. Gave the short plastic carousel of promotional tapes a spin while waiting for the kid to ring him up.

The kid paused with his finger over the cash register, tape in hand. Loose hair to his shoulders, flannel over a concert T-shirt that one more washing would destroy. His narrowing eyes smacked of disapproval.

"Are you still *listening* to them?" he asked.

"Yeah," said Clay. "Are you still selling them for minimum wage?"

The kid smirked and did not answer, took his money, and Clay realized it was the hardest thing he'd done in weeks, giving his cash to this guy. The in-store music seemed to boost in volume, shrieking needles of sound. Clay wondered if the kid noticed the trembling of his hand when he took his change.

The kid did not bothering sacking the tape, just stood tall and superior and flipped it across the counter.

"En*joy*," he said. "Dick."

Clay slipped it into a roomy pocket, stood looking down at his shoes for a moment. They had carried him far in one night, but it was never far enough. Never. He looked up.

He put on his gloves.

"Problem?" the kid asked, with grossly exaggerated concern.

"Uh huh," he said, and punched the brat as hard as he could, felt the nose squash like a plum. Watched him buckle facedown onto the counter, then could not stop himself from grabbing the carousel of promo tapes and

lifting it high. He clubbed him once, on the back of the head. Clubbed him again.

It might have been only one more time.

It might have been forty.

Twenty-Two

She wasn't sleeping as well in Denver as she normally did in Tempe, at least not lately. When the phone rang, somewhere in the depths of the condo, it had no trouble ripping her from sleep, while Sarah dozed like a log, unfazed.

"Probably for you," Adrienne murmured.

She rolled out of bed, got her footing. Sought her robe that hung over the back of a chair, heavy flannel in deference to her first real winter in years; it looked like a horse blanket. Sarah pretended to find it a turn-on, dubbed it lingerie from Frederick's of Iowa.

The phone continued to shrill as she fumbled toward it in the dark. Maybe motherhood was like this, anything to quiet the noise in the dead of night, return to stasis. In the back of her mind she'd always thought she would like to give it a try, but now had to reconsider. A trial run like this and she felt more resentment than anything. Maybe she had no business taking care of a child; no business taking care of anyone.

Eleven or twelve rings, and she found the phone. How much more malevolent they sounded by night, by early morning, at — she squinted at the clock glowing in the kitchen — *four-thirty* in the morning? She said hello and waited, heard nothing but distant traffic, down the street or halfway around the world.

Then: "Adrienne?"

She straightened against the wall, everything coalescing into a phosphorescent pinpoint that burned like a welder's torch. *Clay.* Unaware, she wrapped the spiral cord around her free hand as if she could hang onto him that way, reel him back in.

"I'm glad you called," she said.

"Uh huh." His voice sounded thin and strained. "Can you come get me?"

"Sure." Automatic. "Where are you?"

"I think I might have killed someone."

*

Sarah had offered to drive but Adrienne more than wanted to, she *needed* to. It would leave that much less of her mind free for dread, for every second-guess that floated in from the dark in that predawn hour when nothing seems the same. When love feels sweeter and illness incurable.

Leaving a city behind, a weaving route of on-ramps and merge lanes; Sunday's dawn yet to come and Denver felt dead. Clouds had stolen in overnight to muddy the sky. Adrienne had to consciously stop herself from gnawing at her lower lip. She would show up in Fort Collins looking as if she'd been punched.

I think I might have killed someone.

What if he was right? He would be lost then, to himself and to her, even to his kind; another statistical casualty. If he really had become a danger, she should turn him in. While the doctor-patient relationship was nearly as sacrosanct as that of priest and confessing sinner, she had an ethical duty to the public's safety.

Ah, but she had bent ethics already. If the relationship was that confidential, what was Sarah doing coming along now; what was Sarah doing with full knowledge in the first place?

I am losing all my touchstones, she was forced to admit. *I'm out here with only my conscience for a guide, and it's rebelling at nearly everything I used to think was sacred. Because none of that works this time.*

She'd come to the conclusion that she was doing Arizona Associated Labs' dirty work. Their invasion of privacy under a pretense of providing care. And while those to whom she reported seemed satisfied with what she was sending in, the joke was really on them. She was not even giving full disclosure anymore.

Clay's outburst in which he demolished the bar stool? She had never told them, for fear she might be removed from the scene, that it was getting too dangerous; not in AAL's mercenary view, but possibly Ferris Mendenhall might rescind his cooperation in loaning her out. Likewise she had downplayed how extensive his break with her had been; feeding the hope, keeping it alive, Clay may come around any day. Much of the conversation in the abandoned factory, which Sarah had recounted for her, Adrienne had relayed as if it had been held with her instead, informally. *See, I'm still getting some results.* Clay's tale of the peppered moth, oh, how they had loved that analogy. She was hip-deep in an ethical quagmire, but

unable to convince herself that it was not justified on the most vital level: saving Clay.

If his chromosomes broke the rules, couldn't she?

"Things can't go on like this," Adrienne said, "not if he's going to derive any benefit and get control over himself."

Sarah sat bouncing her knee, holding a mug of coffee whipped together before they had left. "What else can you do that's that much different?"

"I don't know. It's the circumstances, mostly. They don't feel right to me. We dumped him right back into the same life that was creating most of his problems."

"Maybe he'd have problems no matter where he was."

"Maybe." Adrienne nodded. "Probably. If he's really hurt someone up there, it might be possible to commit him now, but…"

"But you really don't want to."

"I don't think it would help at all, I think it'd be giving him the final excuse he needs to destroy himself. I keep thinking I can make *some* difference." She scooted down in the seat, easing off her guard now that they were out of Denver; skinned a hand through her hair and looked at a couple of gold silken strands that came free. *Great, on top of everything else I'm losing my hair.* "I'm wondering now how far I'll go just to try to keep myself in place. I've already held things back at my own discretion, I've twisted things around. Do I draw the line at outright lies?"

After she no longer had access to Clay at all, how many more weeks — days, even — before she began fabricating entire reports, to keep from being recalled home? Turn his case history into fiction, just to avoid giving up on the idea of being part of it?

Sarah's hand, warmed from the mug, found its way to hers; lingered and gave a squeeze before withdrawing.

"Have you thought of hypnotherapy for him?" Sarah said.

"Not seriously, no." It was nothing for which she had ever trained. And while it had its merits, she had reservations that it would even be appropriate. Uncovering a forgotten past was not the issue, and posthypnotic suggestions generally worked better on concrete behavior patterns, not overall ways of relating to the world; thou shalt not smoke, thou shalt not eat to excess.

"He's big on finding out what that chromosome triplet means, you know," Sarah said.

"Trisome."

"Hmm?"

"It's called a trisome."

"Whatever." Sarah gulped at her coffee. "I don't think Clay cares half as much what it's called as he does finding out why it's happening."

"Well, don't we all."

"And not just to him, but to each of them. You know, ever since I talked to him in that factory —"

The factory; now there was a blister to poke. Clay had let Sarah share his inner sanctum when he probably would have waved his chair at Adrienne until she retreated. Jealous? Hell yes.

" — and he told me about the moths, that whole biological and environmental agenda under the surface, you know who I've kept thinking about?"

Adrienne gripped the wheel. This could only be weird. "Who?"

"Remember Kendra Madigan?"

She drew a blank for a moment, and then it hit her, hit her hard. "You've got to be kidding."

"No. I'm not. It might be an interesting thing to try with him, if he'd want to."

Adrienne, shaking her head, was adamant. "*Interesting.* That's a blithe way to put it. Especially when something like that is likely to do more harm than anything."

But this was Sarah she was talking to; typical Sarah, who now and then clung to the oddball and superstitious because she wanted to believe in a shortcut, and she would not be dissuaded. They saw eye-to-eye on much, but here they parted company.

They had heard of Kendra Madigan even before she had come to Tempe for a lecture and debate at the university a year and a half ago. She had been written up in a one-page article Sarah had seen in *Newsweek*, and *Psychology Today* had humored her if nothing else.

A professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, and a practicing hypnotist and psychologist, Kendra Madigan had written a book in which she claimed to have pioneered a hypnosis so deep it was possible

to access the collective unconscious, the species memory that transcended the individual. No one of much note took her seriously, dismissing the technique as so much New Age hokum, although they stopped short of accusing her of fraud. She was, at worst, deluded, her ideas all the more controversial for her use of natural hallucinogens on some subjects. Predictably enough, her reception at Arizona State had been mixed, both enthusiastically pro and skeptically con.

Naturally, Sarah had been enthralled.

"You know what it's like?" Sarah asked. "It's like you're just giving lip service to Carl Jung, and not really putting your money where your ideology is. How can you anchor yourself in Jung like you do and deny the collective unconscious?"

"I never said I was denying it. Did I ever once say that?" Adrienne gripped the wheel harder. This was good, actually. Kept her from dwelling on Clay. "I think it informs most people on a preverbal level, symbolically, maybe in dreams. But you can't convince me someone can give it a voice and ask it questions. That comes close to being as ludicrous as psychics who claim they channel twenty-thousand-year-old entities."

"Oh, forget it." Sarah drew together with a frown. "We've had this argument before."

"It's not an argument, it's a discussion."

"Whatever it is, I'm not budging."

Good for you, Adrienne thought. *One of us should be sure of herself.*

She took her eyes off the highway as dawn struggled, let her gaze drift left, to the mountains. Great vast ranges of rock and earth, they looked so tame from here. Snow-drenched peaks sat wreathed in cataracts of cloudy mist like Olympian dwellings.

It was right that Clay had come this direction. Had she been forced to track him, she would have known instinctively. Deserts and mountains, the refuges of hermits … these called to him with a voice clearer than that of any human being. He professed to be an atheist but she was not convinced he meant it, seemingly compelled to touch something so great it might destroy him. Or maybe it was because he was so inefficient at destroying himself. Either way, he was a believer in search of a higher power.

They picked their way through Fort Collins, following the sketchy directions Clay had provided; found a route that led out the other side of

town, to the northwest, toward the foothills at the base of a mountain drive. The city had thinned to its barest elements, the final fringes before civilization ended.

He had called from a pay phone at an all-night diner and gas station, a rustic outpost set amid generations of pines. They found him inside at a booth, as far from the other early diners as he could get, everyone under a warm comforting miasma of pancakes and cinnamon rolls, coffee and sausage gravy.

Clay said nothing as they approached, laced his hands around a steaming cup; she wondered how many times it had been filled, if that glaze in his eyes was due to caffeine or something deeper.

Adrienne slid into the booth across from him.

Sarah hitched her mittened thumb back over her shoulder. "Why don't I head over to the counter awhile, okay?"

"That's all right," Clay said, "you can stay."

"No," Adrienne said, looked at Sarah. "Go on, it'd be best if we were alone."

She complied, and Clay raised his head, his eyebrows, in mild surprise at her take-charge mood. He looked dreadful, paler than during his final visits, with days of stubble and his hair falling toward his eyes, sweaty and matted from two nights beneath the stocking cap beside him.

"If you called me because you need a taxi," she said, "then I'm afraid I may have to leave without you. If you called me to talk … I'm here."

It came close to an ultimatum, tough talk, but the time had come for that. It was the push of the crowbar that got the story started, interrupted by a waitress, and she took coffee only. He told her about Friday night, some pitiful encounter with Erin. She tried to listen with professional distance but things had gone too far. She pictured the two of them on that floor, too crippled to even hold each other — the most heartbreaking image she had yet associated with him, worse even than the authoritarian abuses by his father; worse than the boy given permission to cry, just the once, for his dead baby sister and discovering he could not.

He told her of hitting the road again, of walking into Fort Collins. Of the record store. And there was remorse in his voice, his eyes; genuine remorse, held in check of course, but present, and that was something to cling to.

"I just kept hitting him," he whispered. "I don't know why."

And as long as he felt bad about it, that made it all right? No, it didn't. Some kid whose worst offense was poor public-relations skills was dead or hospitalized. Yet all she could do was analyze how Clay might be kept in the clear. He had paid with anonymous cash; the shop's only other customer was behind him and would give a poor description; he had worn gloves and left no prints on the plastic carousel. He might never be connected with this.

But if he was, and it came out that she had decided to shield him from the consequences, she could lose her license and might even face prosecution. She shut her eyes.

I am aiding and abetting a felony. She was making a value judgment of ghastly proportions: Clay's crime was less than would be the crime of sending him to prison.

Neither of them spoke for a minute or more. She looked at him sitting there in his ancient field jacket and the layers beneath, saw him as a mountain man driven by the snows down from his chosen isolation. Unfit for society once he got there, living by some simpler brutal law hardwired into his brain.

"After you broke off our sessions, there was something that occurred to me, that I wanted to tell you," she said. "But you wouldn't let me. I'd been listening to tapes of old sessions, and going through your file … and what I wanted to tell you then was: You may think you have no control over yourself, but you *do*. Because with all the conflicts you've been in, you could've killed somebody … yet you haven't. I wanted to tell you that you must've had something inside that was holding you back. Even if you never believed it was there, Clay, *it was*."

"Was," he repeated. "Did you hear yourself?"

She nearly winced. "Clay, I don't know what applies anymore. Whatever it is you've done, I don't even know how bad it is." She drew in tighter with a smoldering and unexpected anger. He was turning into her career's most spectacular failure. They taught you not to take such things personally, although doctors did it anyway. "But I'll tell you what I *do* know: Ever since you started getting those envelopes from Boston, you've acted as if you've completely given up on yourself. You. Have given. Up."

He stared into his coffee, swirling it. "Well, you know, a minute ago I thought I even heard my doctor talk about my little internal lifeline in the

past tense."

"*Am* I your doctor?"

It was as blunt a demand as she'd made, and quieted him; he wouldn't be accustomed to that tone of voice. He set his cup down and she saw the child in him, fleetingly, still tethered to stakes more than twenty years old.

"Yes," he surrendered.

There was no triumph in hearing it. No relief. Worse, for a moment she thought she might have hoped he'd say no. *Coward.*

"Am I going to jail?"

"I don't know," less an answer than a sigh. *I am not proud of myself, any way I turn, I am not going to feel proud of myself.* "Maybe we should wait and see what you've done before…" Before what? Rationalizing it any further? "Before deciding that."

"Thank you," he whispered, and she could not recall him ever having said that before.

"There's something we need to air right now," she said. "This case, it quit being remotely normal a long time ago. I'm not even sure when that happened, probably before you left the hospital, and since then it's only gotten more deviant. I've gone out on one limb after another, I've done things I swore I'd never do, I'm doing them right now —"

Adrienne caught her tongue. Clay wasn't the one to tell this to; she should be talking to a fellow professional, should be on the phone with Ferris Mendenhall the way recovering alcoholics call their sponsors. She had gone too far. And was not prepared to stop.

"What I need to know from you is this: What do you *want*?"

Clay looked only perplexed.

"In the beginning you wanted an explanation about why you react to things the way you do. You wanted understanding. For better or for worse, it looks like you got it. No thanks to me, for the most part, I realize that. But that can't be all. I refuse to believe that's all there was motivating you. So if I'm still your doctor, what else is it you want?"

Clay scratched at his stubbled chin, then looked at her with the smile of one who hopes for the return of lost loves, resurrection of the dead; things that can never be.

"I want to live in a different world," he said.

"I can't help you with that."

Nodding, Clay sighed. "It's a loveless world, you know."

This she denied, pointing toward the counter, where Sarah sat with her back to them, picking at a plate of something; braided and unlike anyone else around, all the shift workers, the early rising sportsmen.

"*I* am in love," she told him quietly. "*Deeply* in love. It's the best and most healing thing in the world. But I wouldn't be in love if I didn't allow myself to take that risk."

"I won't deny that." He chose his words with care, as if taking refuge on the safer ground of theory. "But institutionally, it's still a loveless world. The way we're taught to survive, get ahead, to prosper? You can't tell me that love plays any part in that." Frowning now. "That confused me for the longest time, when I was younger."

There he went again, making sense. She was still trying to cobble together a response when Clay went rampaging on. He may have given up on himself, but he never quit trying to root out an explanation.

"What do *I* want?" He grunted a tiny laugh. "Think about this: What do you think cancer wants?"

She had come to dread these asides. They felt as if he were taking her by the hand and leading her through minefields. Any moment an unexpected truth might explode in her face, while his path was so oblique she could never see them coming.

"You know what cancer is, don't you? It's rapid growth, is all it is, there's nothing magic about it. Cells start multiplying too fast, and so they form their own mass. It gets so, it's like the mass has a mind of its own. It doesn't fit in with the rest of the body but it wants to live anyway. And the more it thrives…" he said, leaving it open for her.

"The more the body suffers," Adrienne finished. The coffee began to curdle in her stomach like a sour pool. Cancer. He was comparing himself to cancer.

"Tumors," he murmured, his eyelids drifting. Had he gone the entire night without sleep? "If that's the way it goes in the human body, why not the body politic? They've decided now that the world's just one big complex organism anyway. So why shouldn't it get cancer? Everybody else is these days." He groaned. "I think it all just started growing too fast one day. Everything. Everybody. So tumors were inevitable, social tumors. Serial

killers. Mass murderers. I'm just part of a new kind of tumor that got squeezed out of it all."

Adrienne breathed deeply, everything inside her crying out to be ill. The coffee had gone toxic, while even the scent of food had become oppressive, nauseous. She imagined all the Helverson's subjects, in united voice, reciting their manifesto: *We are the cancers, the aberrations unable to serve the whole organism. We are the tumors birthed in decay and nourished on rot.*

To which she could think of only one rebuttal.

"A tumor can't change its nature, Clay. A human being can."

"In theory," he said. "If a tumor had self-awareness, do you think it would want to kill its host? I don't think it would, it'd want to come to some coexistence." Pondering now, the dawn of new thoughts. "And maybe that's what I want…

"A separate peace."

Twenty-Three

They got him home and he stayed put, and, to Adrienne's great relief, accessible. No more avoiding her phone calls, he promised; back to his sessions. His latest bout of wanderlust had been aborted after just thirty-three hours, and she and Sarah were the only ones who even knew he had been gone.

It felt like more than a secret. It settled within her as a grim and ugly pact shared by conspirators who had buried a body by moonlight, who had smoothed the earth over as best they could, and swore an oath.

Thankfully, however, it had not literally come to that.

She had bought the Sunday edition of the Fort Collins *Coloradoan* from a vending machine before they had left town, and found nothing on the assault in the record store. She picked up the next day's edition in Denver and learned that, whatever his transgressions, Clay was no killer. The CSU junior he'd attacked had been hospitalized with a skull fracture and lacerations; not good, but a long way from a murder victim. The police had only the vaguest description of his assailant, and she reasoned that, if they investigated much at all, they would concentrate locally. What reason would they have of suspecting the assailant to be a drifter? How many drifters, in the winter, went shopping for cassettes?

Clay conformed to no pattern.

He'll get away with this, she thought. *He'll get away with this because I let him.*

Adrienne got him, under some protest, to resume taking lithium; got him another bottle to replace those he had flushed. She got him to agree to three sessions in six days — a crisis schedule, but surely this qualified.

She did not shy away from his attack on the student. In the eyes of the world they might pretend it never happened, but not with each other. She had him dissect it, analyze his feelings at each stage; they took it apart until they could scrutinize the incident frame by frame, like a shaky film of an assassination.

She hammered away to reinforce the notion that he had a conscience, and since it was operable after the fact he should be able to employ it beforehand. It would require that he make an effort to pause before acting on impulse, and imagine having completed whatever he might be tempted to do. Carry it to its ends: Who would be hurt, who would suffer? He should close his eyes, if need be, and feel his way through the pain that lay in wait for everyone; better to summon forth imaginary guilt than render the real thing necessary.

Neither did she ignore Clay's new hypothesis that he and the others were social malignancies. Although the more she gave it thought, the more it seemed that Clay had intuitively hit upon something that made a bit of sense on a literal level, as well as metaphorically. Biochemically, some people simply were programmed for violence, and the surroundings in which they grew up could have a tremendous influence.

She knew that aggression had a chemical basis. In the brain’s vast web of circuitry, behavioral messages were relayed by chemicals known as neurotransmitters, two of which — serotonin and norepinephrine — regulated aggression. In studies, men whose spinal fluid was found to have high levels of serotonin, which carried inhibitory messages, routinely scored low on aggression; those higher in norepinephrine were correspondingly more aggressive. That was why Clay had been prescribed lithium in the first place; it worked by boosting serotonin levels. She was not convinced it was wholly effective on him — it did not work on psychotics and calculating predators — but it could not hurt.

Yet it was those environmental factors that really intrigued her. It had been proven that a child's early surroundings could even influence his biochemistry. Young boys from homes in which they faced situations that provoked aggressive responses were often found to have begun adapting to that environment: Their systems had begun to produce less serotonin, more norepinephrine.

They were gearing up to survive.

So why not take a wild leap and superimpose that process upon a much larger picture? Suppose the bodies — the very genetic encoding — of human beings *were* responding to the colossal pressures exerted by a world whose rate of change was increasing exponentially.

Was it so mad a thought? It had taken a billion years for the brains of the first vertebrates to evolve into the intelligence of primates. In a mere two million, self-aware humanity had developed and assumed dominion. From common ancestors, the *Australopithecus* and *Homo* genera diverged, the former dying out, a failed lineage, while the latter thrived. *Homo habilis* learned to use tools, and was replaced by *Homo erectus*, who mastered fire and hunting, who was in turn replaced by *Homo sapiens*, who mastered all else after emerging perhaps 40,000 years ago. Within the past 6000, modern civilization had arisen; the past 4500, enduring architecture. The past three hundred, the industrial age. The past fifty, nuclear fusion. The past thirty, the ability to set foot on another celestial body. And since then had come the manufacture of artificial hearts and fiber-optic filaments, and the development of laser microsurgery.

All this, while the DNA of *Homo sapiens* was still ninety-nine percent identical to that of the chimpanzee.

With such a wrenching burst of development, might not a genetic whiplash like Helverson's syndrome at least be feasible?

Adrienne had heard it said that *Homo sapiens* had ceased to evolve because there was no more need. The end goal served by evolution is success in breeding, and certainly that success was indisputable. *Homo sapiens* had become not only the most successfully prolific species on earth; it had become the sole species possessing the ability to destroy itself.

Perhaps those who claimed that modern humanity didn’t need to evolve any further were just being smug about their top rung on the ladder. Maybe they'd not considered that more fine-tuning would become necessary to psychologically adapt to the world that had emerged out of their unchallenged dominion.

Grand schemes; even bolder conjecture. But she had heard no explanation for Helverson's syndrome that made any more sense, so she would at least entertain it.

Grand schemes. Bold conjecture. And an indifferent nature that encouraged diversity and variation, so that to the victor would belong the spoils.

Still, in the end, it came down to individuals, who struggled to be born, struggled to live with the differences that made them mutants among their own kind, and who struggled against the death that waited for them all.

Who struggled mightily, even nobly, regardless of who had made them, and how…

And why.

*

At the end of the week, Sarah came home late in the afternoon with a ring in her navel. Giddy and hyper, she could have climbed walls, could have dazzled distant stars with the gleam in her eyes.

She finally stood still long enough to pose with legs braced wide, leaning back with her hips and belly thrust forward as she tugged up her black T-shirt, the ominous Club Cannibal shirt she used to sleep in. "Don't you love it?"

Adrienne stared.

Sarah's navel was centered like a pearl in the firm lush swell of her belly, and the ring was skewered through its thick top lip, a simple uroboros of silver. The surrounding skin was red and inflamed, but not as much as Adrienne might have expected. A few thin streaks of dried blood were left on her skin.

"I had it done at this piercing gallery Nina goes to for her ears, and it was so great, they're really serious about what they do there, and look at it as a ritual, and they play whatever music you'd like while it's being done, and they talk to you and hold your hand, and whoever's hanging out at the time can watch if you don't mind."

Adrienne blinked. "Did you?"

"Did I mind?" Sarah was incredulous, then broke into a broad smile. "Of course not, I sort of liked that I wasn't going through it alone. When people are watching it's like this encouragement to endure the pain better, it's this support system even though they're mostly strangers you'll never see again." She had scarcely paused for breath since walking in. Sarah let the shirt fall loosely back into place while twining up against her, running her hands along Adrienne's sides and breathing heavily through parted lips. "But I can't *tell* you how much I wanted your tongue on me when it was happening, I could have come all the way to the ceiling."

And when they kissed, she was so deep and forceful; Adrienne had never been kissed like that by another woman, not even by Sarah in the past, a brutish kiss that she had thought the ploy of men. It weakened the

knees, and then Sarah tore away with wet mouth and a wild back-toss of her head, and swept across the room to collapse upon the sofa.

"They told me this happens to some people, they'll get this incredible endorphin rush for the next three or four hours, it's just like a drug, and wouldn't you know, *I'm one of the lucky ones!*" She laughed and drummed her fists upon the sofa, her feet upon the floor, then parted her legs to slide both hands down along her inner thighs. Eyes focusing back on Adrienne, alight with an all-consuming hunger. "There's still time, let's go to bed, we have to go to bed, if we don't I'm going to explode."

So they did, and Adrienne went into the bedroom and undressed as if half-outside herself: *This isn't me, this is just a shell, and the real me is across the room watching.* For the first time in their relationship the sex reminded her of nights in her marriage when she had submitted not out of any genuine desire, more that she didn't have the will to say no, because there was nothing else she had to do.

Their lips and tongues and fingers lacked for no heat, but five minutes in she knew what the problem was: She had been left behind. Sarah was soaring, on a high all her own, and both the blessing and the curse was that Sarah was too far aloft to notice. They had to be careful not to grind upon her stomach, but still Sarah was electrified and wild, so sensitive a feathery touch could turn her convulsive with rapture. Her head would thrash side to side, its cascade of thin braids became whips. And with Adrienne's mouth buried between her thighs, never had Sarah's legs felt more powerful as when they clenched together, as if to crush the head that had brought her so shudderingly far. She had become more than mortal; it was like making love with a force of nature. To deny her anything she wanted would be to risk death.

Somewhere in the shadow of it Adrienne lay exhausted. There might not even be enough air in the room for them both. How sore she would be tomorrow. This would be how the servants of savage deities would feel: beloved meat, knowledgeable and privileged, but meat nonetheless.

In the interim, one tiny misgiving had grown, and burst from her mouth before she even knew it would.

"If you didn't want to go through that piercing alone," she said, "then why didn't you take me along? I didn't even know you were planning on doing it."

"I don't know. Nina was there, and…" She turned onto her side, facing inward. Calmer now, what a relief. "I didn't want to bother you. You had a session with Clay earlier."

"You couldn't have waited until I didn't?"

"You had your work, and … and I had mine."

Work. She'd really said that.

Adrienne's hand stole over to Sarah's belly, touched the hot red skin around her navel. The ring. A bit of clear fluid was oozing from the piercing. For weeks, Sarah would daily have to doctor this with antiseptic until it healed.

"This was work to you."

Sarah nodded. "I wanted to know what it was like, getting a body piercing. Ears don't count, everybody does their ears, that's nothing."

"Your thesis."

"Yeah." Sarah grinned, salacious and heavy-lidded. "There's no rule saying I can't enjoy it, too. What, don't tell me you don't like it. You like it, don't you?"

Her gaze tracked to Sarah's navel again. It drew the eye naturally, and part of her wanted to lower her mouth to it, trace her tongue around the little folds, like tiny pudenda, taste the metal. Too soon, though, let it heal. Yet the ring felt intimidating. Neither of them wore a thing at the moment, yet it seemed as if Sarah were *more* naked, somehow, her bared body all the more emphasized. Naked and strong.

"I like it," she whispered. "I just wish I'd been there."

"Don't be mad" — stroking Adrienne's hair — "I had to do this for myself. For *them*, too, it's so much more prevalent a part of their culture. Graham has nipple piercings — I bet you didn't know that about him, did you? Nina told me that Twitch went in twice to get his cock pierced and chickened out both times." She laughed. "Erin was there too. This afternoon. I had her tape it."

Videotape, too. Why hadn't she just sent out invitations?

"I understand why they do it now," Sarah said, the carnal beast sated for the time being, the inquisitive Sarah emerging. "It's an experience you just can't compare with having your ears done. These people — Nina and Twitch and Erin and Graham and Clay, and the others I've met at the clubs and all around — they're so low in the social strata, they're forced to assert

some control in their lives in other ways, and this is one of them. You never feel more alive and in control of yourself as when you trust someone else to run a piece of sharp metal through you. I never would've believed how strong that feeling comes through when you're lying there if I hadn't done it myself."

Adrienne tracked a finger through the sweat between Sarah's breasts. "It sounds like a rite of passage."

"That's exactly what it is. You know what they are out there? I mean, think about them all, at the clubs, and on the streets. It's tribal. They don't formalize it, but it's still a tribal society." Sarah rolled onto her back, staring upward. "I miss the ceiling fan from home. That always feels so good now." A shrug. "That's all most everyone is these days, just a collection of isolated tribes, finding more and more reasons to be suspicious of each other. In primitive cultures there's only room for one view, really, just to survive, but ours … hundreds, thousands maybe. And we're not any different back home in Tempe. All our friends, just about, are just like us. You, me, them, we're this little tribe of muff-divers."

Adrienne frowned. "Don't confine me like that, all right?"

"No, I guess I can't, can I?" Sarah propped herself up on her elbow. "Because *you* can't make the commitment. You've still got one foot on the other side of the fence."

Her voice sounded hurt all of a sudden, and angry, and where was this *coming* from?

"And you tell me I have trouble making up *my* mind?"

"I —" Adrienne tried. Anything she could say would be wrong, but silence would be worse. "I never pretended to be something I wasn't. It's the way I am. My inclinations just didn't fall exclusively one way or another."

"Oh, that's so analytical," Sarah groaned. With her hair still in those braids, she looked feral and wounded. "You know, there are times you seem one step removed from your life."

And it didn't bear arguing about, for there was no right or wrong here. Each of them was what she was, and true to that; made differently, and perhaps only half-compatible, and it was that other half that could potentially bring so much pain. Pain over what one might long for, that the other could never be.

As quickly as she had launched into it, Sarah drew back out. With downcast eyes and creased forehead, she squirmed in closer to Adrienne's side, radiant with body heat and sheer presence, one arm thrown across Adrienne's shoulders, one leg draped across Adrienne's knees. She might have no words left; her body would say all. That was the thing about arguing naked: There was nothing behind which to hide, only raw truth.

So Adrienne lay in her possessive embrace, even returned it, but felt alive with questions. *What will happen to us?* — this was the big one. *How will we see each other in a year, or two, or five? It could work between us, always, but will our hormones let it?*

They left the bed later. When neither felt like cooking, Sarah volunteered to go for Chinese take-out. A peace offering, it felt like, her suggestion made almost sheepishly, *I know how much you love Chinese.*

The condo suffered for her absence, some vitality missing, and Adrienne tried to fill the void with music, turning the stereo louder than it needed to be.

She sat on the sofa with one leg folded beneath her, holding the rainstick that was supposed to remind her of San Francisco, and had when at first, but no longer did. New meanings had supplanted old. She turned it end to end to end, listening to the delicate showers. Whether or not Sarah had covertly intended it, the sound now conjured up her more than anything, from her wide knowing eyes to her peasant feet, and everything between. The gift had become the giver.

And what might the giver become? Adrienne had been worried at first by this evolving Sarah, with the whiplike hair and the navel ring and the penchant for new friends more pessimistic than those she had at home. But these were only affectations. She was the same Sarah, just doing what she had been schooled to do: live amongst the savages, and take them to her heart.

It was entirely possible that the fear on display in the bedroom had manifested itself backward, that her own issue was not whether this was the same Sarah or some darker twin. Perhaps fear of abandonment lay in both their hearts, and only one of them had courage enough to admit it.

She's so alive and absorbs so much more than I do. There, it was good to admit it. *In a year's time, or two, or five, will I seem like* enough *for her? That's the question.*

But nobody could answer it now, and sometimes the best anyone could do was sit and listen to the rain. And in lieu of the real thing…

Make her own.

Twenty-Four

Word spread fast: Graham announced that not only did he plan on unveiling a new piece — his largest and most complex yet, he promised — but tonight would be a first. Tonight he would actually confer a name on something.

Adrienne and Sarah both thought it significant. All those paintings and not a one of them named … like illegitimate children he might have been ashamed of and would rather have forgotten. Perhaps he was entering a new phase. Like Picasso and his blue period, maybe Graham was leaving his bastard-offspring period behind. Although they might as well offer Vegas odds on what lay ahead. Nina thought it had something to do with whatever he was keeping locked in that storage room, and was being so secretive about.

Graham said he didn't want to do it until everyone could be there, which included Uncle Twitch, so that meant they would have to wait until he got off work. From there it was a short hop to the suggestion that they all pass the night at The Foundry.

Did she really want to be here? Adrienne had yet to decide, every decision borderline these days, it seemed, not necessarily to be trusted. Ulterior motives might be veined beneath their surfaces.

The Foundry was the same, always the same, claustrophobic and smoky and dank, thudding with enough force to twitter the stomach, and packed with Sarah's tribes of discontent and disillusion. The wall screens dished up one silent, ghastly image after another; at the moment, one was flashing excerpts from what appeared to be an old precautionary film on industrial accidents. The camera zoomed blandly in on the hand of an ashen-faced blue-collar worker being treated at a first-aid station. One finger was flayed to the bone, as if it had been ground down in a pencil sharpener.

"I put in a special request for this tape tonight," Graham was saying. "Twitch told them it was my birthday."

"How many birthdays does that make this year?" Nina asked.

"Five. They never remember."

"They would if they gave free drinks on your birthday," said Erin.

Sarah leaned forward, elbows on the table, too far away for anything less than a shout. "Any significance to this particular tape?"

He slid back in his chair and watched, eyes either reverent or half-drunk, it was difficult to decide. How did he view this? More carnage, a twisted leg broken in at least three places, the bends agonizing to contemplate. The screen was the mirror of the soul? Maybe that was the key to Graham's fascination.

"It makes me think," he said. "I always wonder what the accidents sounded like. You know how bone conducts sound? I always wonder what sound these poor dumb fuckers heard that nobody else around them could hear."

"Well, I'll tell you what they heard the next day," Erin said.

"What's that?"

"Weeping insurance agents."

Most of them laughed, a good mean chuckle at the expense of State Farm and Prudential, which suddenly struck Adrienne as a telling moment. They liked tragedy and misery because of the purely random element inherent in them. Suffering was a great equalizer, respecting no money or status. If they could never aspire to the success they saw flaunted around them, what perverse comfort it must be to see that success was no insulation from life's cruelties.

This they'd understood long before she had.

Adrienne found her eyes returning over and over to Nina, who had undergone another of her metamorphoses. Gone were the red dye and scarves and flamboyant gypsy skirts. Her thick hair hung straighter now, black, and she wore a flowing sari draped about her chunky body. A tiny, jeweled bead glittered at the side of one pierced nostril. She looked like the world's palest Hindu.

"How does she manage to pull this off?" Adrienne asked Sarah, discreetly, once Nina had gone to the bar. "She should look ridiculous but she doesn't."

Sarah beamed. "It's the weirdest thing, isn't it? Don't you think it must be that deep down she adopts something of whatever it is she takes on? She never seems to be playing a role."

"A serial multiple personality."

Sarah frowned, cocking her head. "That's a bit severe —"

"I'm joking."

When Nina returned with drinks, she toasted to celebrate resuming her creative endeavors with mutant children's literature.

"I know what I was doing wrong with the first ones," she said. "I really was writing for kids and trying to be as honest with them as I could be, and that's why it never went anywhere."

"Better the little brats learn the awful truth now, huh?" Graham perked up with a cockeyed laugh. "That'll teach you the value of honesty."

"Right, right!" Nina squeezed his arm, delighted. "See, he gets it! So what I decided I should do is write satirical children's lit for adults who know better now."

"I like this," said Clay, laughing. It was the closest thing to enjoyment she had seen in him for too long. "You've already started one, haven't you. I can tell."

Nina's head bobbed with excitement. "It's a sadomasochistic fantasy on the high seas. *The Slave Ship Lollipop*."

Even Adrienne laughed at the idea; and Sarah, well, forget it: Sarah was howling.

"You can publish a whole line," Adrienne told her, inspired, or maybe it was the gin, "and call the series *Crib Death*."

Definitely the gin, but maybe she had needed that for a while. Two parts gin to one part anxiety, then stir. Things *did* feel better now, looser, and it didn't even seem so sad to think that Nina's latest scheme was surely doomed to failure, like the rest. How undaunted she seemed, something noble in the way she flung herself headlong into new identities, new projects, without a trace of bitterness over the past. If only she could hang onto that. Seeing Clay more comfortable than he had been since Fort Collins made her wonder if being around Nina was actually therapeutic for him.

He sat on Erin's right, Graham to Erin's left, she between the two of them like a mediator. Clay had told Adrienne there hadn't been anything much between him and Erin since that pathetic Friday night, neither one mentioning it since, skirting the matter like a secret shame. He had

confessed maybe it was better that way, maybe she would gravitate toward Graham and they both would be happier for it. And himself?

What's a little more solitude to an emotional hermit? he had said. She'd told him to can the self-pity and take a risk.

She was starting to feel the slightest bit unsteady in her chair when Erin leaned over to touch her arm, a moment Erin looked as if she had been waiting for. She scooted across a seat Adrienne realized was now empty, Clay and Graham having disappeared. Erin waved toward the dance floor, where things had turned très savage.

"Whenever Twitch plays anything by Skrew," she said, "they can't resist." Watching for a moment, the two of them out there, underfed and only partially visible, colliding repeatedly with each other while the stale air was rent with shreds of growling thunder. "It's like those nature films they shoot up in the Rockies, with the bighorn sheep butting heads."

"Over you?" Adrienne asked.

Her smile was a shy flicker. "It'd be flattering to think so. But they probably would anyway." Erin tried to laugh and it came out very wrong. "I wanted to ask you something."

Adrienne nodded, blinking to clear her eyes. *This sounds serious and I have no business hearing serious right now —*

Erin checked beyond their huddle to make sure it would go no further; Sarah and Nina were in their own little animated world.

"If," she said, "if I can convince him to do it, do you think you might, like … talk to Graham? You know … privately? Like you do with Clay?"

"I suppose I could spend a little time with him," she heard herself saying. "But it would be better if I helped him get with someone who could be more impartial. With that triangle between you and him and Clay, I don't know, Erin." Wait, why was she even asking this now? Adrienne leaned in and hoped her eyes would not betray her fallen sobriety. "Is something going on that might have an impact on Clay, that I should know about?"

Erin's forehead creased as she folded her arms, stick arms over an enviable chest, shaking her head. "No, it's just Graham, I'm really starting to worry, he's getting more like Clay in one respect, he's holding things in more than he ever used to, and I'm *afraid* for him. Last week…" A steadying breath. "Last week he asked me to marry him and I said no, I

wasn't ready to marry anybody. Can you imagine? I can't even get the hang of monogamy."

Adrienne shut her eyes a moment. The pounding from the speakers felt as if it were thickening her brain with scar tissue. "How did Graham react?"

"He spent maybe twenty minutes talking about hanging himself. I don't know how to deal with this. He finally quit and said he was just kidding, but…" She could not finish.

I don't know how to deal with it either, Adrienne almost told her, but said she would have a word with Graham, as long as she could make it appear that she and Erin were not conspiring against him — but really, they *should* discuss this later.

"And that little room, where he's been sculpting whatever the hell it is," Erin went on, "even I don't know what's going on in there. It's been like an obsession for him the past week or more. He's burning something in there, you wouldn't believe the smell."

Adrienne supposed that this was when what had started out as a promising evening really began its dive. Such a precarious balance this group walked. Ten minutes could make a difference that almost defied belief. Their whole lives were one bipolar mood disorder.

When Clay and Graham came wobbling back from the dance floor, she saw that Clay was bleeding from a cut on his forehead and Graham looked glumly sheepish, kept rubbing his elbow. She thought of Lady Macbeth, rubbing, rubbing, out, damned spot.

Another hour, two, and Sarah tried to get Adrienne to dance when the motion was less frenzied, but by now the last things she trusted were her feet and her balance. Only perception seemed unimpaired. If anything, it had amplified, the grim subterranean world of The Foundry roaring around her, inside her.

Then someone staged a whipping, a special treat for the night — Nina had mentioned this happened occasionally, but Adrienne had yet to see it, had only once noticed two pairs of handcuffs dangling from one of the chain link partitions.

Garter-belted young woman; scarred male plaything stripped to the waist and cuffed in place, barebacked; the crowd made room as the coil of black leather rose and fell, stretched and recoiled; some cheering and others

watching, glazed and mesmerized, the crack of the lash just audible over the hushed sensual throb of whatever music Twitch had cued —

And the worst of it was, this was taking place not fifteen feet away, and to her coagulated reasoning it really had begun to seem normal, perfectly normal behavior for a Wednesday night.

Why else would she have gone streaming away from the table with the others for a closer look?

Beside her, Sarah watched without blinking, and soon lifted one hand before her mouth, two fingers at her lips as she idly pushed her tongue tip back and forth through the cleft between them, as distractedly content as a toddler sucking its thumb.

I'll lose her someday, Adrienne thought, *I won't be enough,* and it didn't even seem as sad as it should; just another given.

"You want to be over there doing it too, don't you?"

"I might have to someday." Sarah nodding, an automaton. "I might have to know. How it feels. From either side. I might."

She broke from her trance, dropped her hand with a grin as if only now realizing what she had been doing. She reached out to bury that hand in Adrienne's hair and kissed her deeply as Adrienne left her eyes open, peripherally aware of the flicker of the lash. Sarah tasted of some exotic liqueur, sweet and spicy-bitter, or maybe it only seemed exotic because it was Sarah. It felt as one of those moments of great revelation, understanding why she sometimes wanted to die so happy, and why, at rare other times, she wanted only to run.

"Who loves me?" Sarah breathed into her mouth, with heavy-lidded eyes.

"Everyone," said Adrienne. "Everyone does."

*

Graham's door at 3:00 A.M., and there were too many of them to stumble through at once. That was the way it felt to her, all of them like parts of the same body, divided by severed nerves. The usual suspects, now that Uncle Twitch was free, plus a couple of others who had tagged along. Young, the both of them: a slim, breastless girl who looked no older than sixteen; her boyfriend, who obviously idolized Graham and clutched to his chest one of the charred-and-spiked baby dolls he had ripped from The Foundry's ceiling, periodically asking to have it autographed. He'd said he

had been here late one night last year, with friends, though Graham did not remember.

"I'm, I'm an artist too," the boy confessed at one point. It appeared to have taken great effort.

Graham nodded. "How nice for you." He rolled his head about to loosen his neck, and stroked the girl on her bare shoulder; she seemed to shrink a half step away. "Well *if* you're an artist, you really have to learn to *share* things, foster a sense of community. You knew that already, didn't you?"

The boy stood looking younger and younger, newly mute as he watched Graham knead the girl's shoulder. She had not made another move to retreat, but her eyes were sick and confused, back and forth. Her arms folded into a fragile shelter.

Adrienne watched from a chair, slumped in and holding tight. It seemed the most solid ground she could find. First impulse was to say something, knock it off, Graham, but she reconsidered: Why should it be her responsibility? If they lived this way it was by choice.

"Don't," the boy mumbled, finding his voice, pleading to the floor, "don't do that, please don't, *don't*."

Erin came in from the bathroom and quickly sized things up, stomped over to yank Graham by one arm, what the hell do you think you're doing, and he stumbled away with a groaning laugh that held no mirth, nor even cruelty, only emptiness.

"Just my luck," he said, "my first protégé and he's a Quaker or something. I wonder what he does for talent."

I want to go home, Adrienne thought*, this was all to see some painting or sculpture and I bet it never even happens now.* Too far gone, she dared not drive, and dared not issue Sarah an ultimatum for fear of the choice she would hear.

After hours, midway between midnight and dawn, this chilly basement apartment felt like a speakeasy. It had ceased to be fun a long time ago but they were still trying. Clay channel surfing at the TV, Nina at the stereo, Twitch raiding the refrigerator and bellowing for beer that wasn't there.

Then Sarah laid one hand on Graham's shoulder, one on Erin's, to quell whatever vicious discussion they were having in a corner. After a

moment he grew calm, seemed to take it as a restoration of purpose. Sarah walked away but Adrienne kept watching — nothing like the perspective of distance. She was as omniscient as a voyeur. Graham reached out, as timidly as if he had been beaten, to hold Erin. Over her shoulder his face seemed to sag and flow like a melting candle.

You'll always have my heart, Adrienne thought he said as they broke. *That's the problem.*

"Well, shit," he then said, loud enough to be heard by all, "let's get this done."

Graham called them together and led them over to the least-used corner of the basement, around a door that was secured by a stout padlock. His eyes grew distant as he fished a key from beneath his shirt, on a chain around his neck.

"Shazam," he murmured, and opened the door.

Twitch's bobbing head was in Adrienne's way, but even if it weren't, she doubted she could discern what was in there … just some staggeringly solid *shape* beyond the door. The smell was freed, dense and acrid, an accumulated stink of scorched metal.

Graham was first in, and flipped on the overhead light.

The word *monolithic* floated to mind, but she quickly decided it wasn't right. It implied aloofness, the timeless indifference of something that measures centuries the way mortals measure seconds.

This? This thing? It was unnatural and grotesque and malevolent.

It reached nearly to the ceiling, and three-quarters of the distance from wall to wall, a jagged conglomerate of more small machines than could be counted, more than could even be identified at first glance, or second. One abutted another that flowed into the next, like jumbled refuse that had only partially survived a holocaust's meltdown; a slag heap left in the declining wake of progress and ambition.

Graham held the door open and they crowded in, slowly, as if the thing would bite. No one saying a word. No one dared.

With a closer look, she could make out individual components: electric motors; power tools of all kinds, table saws and circular saws and jigsaws, drills and lathes and sanders; chainsaw belts had been secured between motor-driven pulleys. All had been joined into a hulking

Frankenstein's monster by welded stitches, the metal having been allowed to melt and flow, then cool like metallic tumors.

Even the room had become a part of the creation, the concrete walls and ceiling having been drenched with soot over time. It was all black and gray in here, a world in monochrome.

Once they had taken it in, Adrienne felt the logical next thought ripple through all of them, everyone glancing left and right into neighbors' eyes, realizing something had been going terribly wrong and no one had guessed its magnitude.

Graham could not have intended this to be a sculpture, not in any reasonable sense … because it could never leave the room.

"I didn't mean for it to get so big," he said, "but it just kept growing."

"Graham?" Erin's voice, tiny, as if she were calling a stranger, or had heard someone say he was maimed.

"Some of it even works, still, that's what took longest to get right," he said, and yes, she really had seen cables and conduit snaking about within, like arteries.

He stepped over to the back wall, stooped. Plugged it in.

The air in the dense room seemed to surge for a surreal moment as motors hummed to tortured life, then began to shriek all at once. The grinding roar was instantly painful, and only Graham did not clap his hands over his ears. Adrienne swore that she saw the structure thrum like a tuning fork, as all those moving parts churned up a breeze that carried a congealed stink of old fires. Saw blades spinning and belts whirring, metal teeth a blur. It made no sense. It was the cold, hard embodiment of illogic. It hung together and functioned when it should have ripped itself into shrapnel.

They fled the room in a spontaneous exodus, and Graham must have let it run another fifteen seconds before pulling the plug. He shuffled out of the blackened room as the cacophony wound down and broke apart into a dozen component voices, high dying whines. When it grew quiet enough, they could hear an upstairs neighbor pounding on the floor, his muffled shout.

"Graham, man…?" said Twitch, gangly limbs in awkward poise, as if flight might be imminent. "This is … this is…"

"In seventeenth-century terminology, it's an infernal machine. And it exists for its own sake." He stood before the doorway and took a little bow,

or a sick parody. To Clay: "Now you know what I've been doing with all the scraps you brought me from the dump."

They had scattered around the apartment, each seeming to have chosen his or her turf and rooted there, old friends and young strangers alike. Adrienne knew she was faring no better. Head thumping and ears ringing, she thought, *He shocked them. I didn't think it was even possible, but he shocked them.*

"What's its name?" Nina asked. "You said it was going to have a name."

Graham nodded. "I didn't even realize it had one until three days ago. But that's when I knew." How frail he looked, how malnourished, his cheekbones sharper, with unruly dark curls hanging to his eyes, those eyes the only thing about him that seemed suddenly, madly, vibrant. "It's called *The Dream of Kevorkian*."

No one moved, no one spoke.

"I don't get it," said Twitch.

"The suicide doctor," Adrienne said, or thought she made the attempt, and her legs went wobbly.

It couldn't be happening, could *not*, Graham giving them all a resigned look, saying nothing but the look conveying enough, *Well, that's everything,* and he retreated into the charred room and the door slammed and it sounded as if another padlock was being fitted into place, this time from the inside.

Jack Kevorkian, the suicide doctor, inventor of the suicide machine — did he dream of contraptions more violent than his own, machines even more brutal than that of Dr. Joseph-Ignace Guillotin?

Nothing was happening in fluid motion anymore, just snapshots of hyperclarity: Nina the first to reach the door, then Sarah, then the rest, fists pounding or twisting at the knob, but all they could do was rattle it in its frame. They called out and Adrienne heard her own voice join the clamor, not even sure what she was saying, only that it was a desperate plea.

When the infernal machine resumed its metallic hurricane roar, Erin screamed. A long, agonized scream —

As harrowing as the moment of anticipation.

As futile as the hope that Graham was only joking.

As piercing as the wet marrow shriek of a bone saw.

Twenty-Five

He had never been one for obligatory rituals, but Clay now thought perhaps he recognized their necessity.

Denver saw no funeral for Graham Layne Detweiler, his recoverable remains sent to Pennsylvania, back to a home he had not acknowledged for years. What happened there, none of them knew. Denver saw no funeral, but should have.

Some sense of closure was needed, any kind of scab over the open wound that his suicide had been. Its shock had staying power, lingering throughout the days — Graham, alive one moment and gone the next, *more* than gone, gone in a way that seemed to rend his existence into fibers and mist.

Clay supposed they could have stolen into his apartment and conducted their own ceremony in Graham's charnel room. *The Dream of Kevorkian* remained intact, probably stymieing everyone from the police to the landlord, and no doubt they could have retrieved some fragment of Graham from the machinery. All those cracks and crevices? There was no way all of him could have been recovered for shipment. Some scrap could surely be their prize to tweeze free and bury.

But Clay decided that it was a ghoulish idea, would be more upsetting than comforting to everyone, and kept it to himself.

Besides, they *had* done one thing, no memorial by any means, but at least one final act to preserve whatever legacy Graham had left behind.

Twitch had been the first to state the obvious, that Graham would have hated the idea of his paintings being gathered with the rest of his belongings and carried east, to be stacked in some airless storage facility because, while his parents would detest them too much to display them, they could not bring themselves to destroy them. Knowing Graham, it would probably not be the where so much as the who.

They took it upon themselves to recover the paintings, Twitch and Clay, with Nina serving as lookout. With a crowbar they ripped away the

padlock used to secure the place, then used Erin's door key. It was four in the morning and they drove away having liberated thirty-two canvases.

These were divided up at Twitch and Nina's two days later, like a grim auction, all these metallurgy dreams uneasy reminders, particularly his final painting, the Boschian landscape with its myriad body-chewing machines. Terrible prophecy, that; no one spoke up as wanting it until Nina suggested giving it to Sarah, for Graham had been pleased by her love of it on first viewing, her immediate understanding. He really had been, Nina insisted, even if no one had noticed but her.

Clay made sure that Adrienne was not left out, in the end selecting for her a two-by-three-foot acrylic of a twisted iron bridge that seemed to hover over a raging river the colors of rust and slate, a bridge with no access and no exit, going nowhere. He gave it to her while Sunday-afternoon snow brushed the windows of Twitch and Nina's home, and even before his hands had left the canvas he saw tears slip from Adrienne's eyes. They stared openly at each other, neither pretending the other did not know.

Crying, Adrienne? As unexpected as it was, even more so was that she made no effort to hide it or dam it back. Real tears, real grief, she was fully human after all, more human to him for that than even for her obvious love of Sarah. It was like looking into the wet red eyes of a person he had only thought he'd met, the moment somehow more devastatingly honest than any moment in all their sessions.

Adrienne. Crying.

It was nothing to stare at but stare he did, as the paintings continued to find keepers and curators, peering out of the corner of his eye. Adrienne. Crying. Sarah's arms around her and the two of them leaning into each other. Take one away and the other would fall, but together they balanced just fine.

I want what they have, he thought. Other people managed, so why couldn't he? It was the grand failure of his life, being born, being born so different there wasn't even a name for it until six years ago. He looked at the paintings he had claimed so far, closed doors and piles of slag and scrap, and he thought, *There it is, my life, it's all right there, he painted it and probably never knew it was me. Because it was him, too.*

Adrienne. Crying. Being held.

He met Erin's eyes, almost went to where she sat on the couch but his legs would not move, his arms would not reach, and maybe Graham had had the right idea after all: If the fucking things don't work right, then cut them off.

Erin had him over to her tiny apartment that night, her invitation almost shy, so unlike the Erin he thought he had known, the Erin he preferred to know. There was so much to say and none of it seemed to come out right, from the very start, so they gave up and tried to go to bed. No camera, just the two of them face-to-face, eye-to-eye, a pair of candles burning on her dresser while outside the snow had gone icy enough to peck at the window. It should have been romantic but seemed instead a desperate, last-ditch attempt at pretending to be that which they were not. She trembled as she kissed him, and when he tried to enter her she was dry, completely dry, as if the rest of her body had sucked up all the moisture and held it for ransom. He rolled off her, his erection dying, and soon Erin burst into more tears than he had ever seen from her.

Tears — she had found them at last.

"What … what'd I do wrong?" he asked.

She shook her head against the pillow, continuing to dampen it, and he got up, mentally answering for her: *You lived, that's what.* And went off to sleep on the couch, where he could do no more harm.

He supposed he would have made more of an effort to shatter those walls, any walls, no matter how alien such tender advances would have felt, had he known he would never see her again. Never dreaming she would resort to what she did, never considering the possibility that Erin would pack up what she could and leave the rest, then do the unthinkable: drive away, return to South Dakota, and move back in with her parents. It seemed the ultimate defeat, a living death; the final degradation in a life filled with them — she had the pictures to prove it.

No phone call, no advance warning. He knew it only when Nina came over Wednesday afternoon to tell him, and give him a videotape that Erin had entrusted to her on the way out of town two hours earlier.

"Did you watch it?" he asked.

"She told me not to." Nina stood in the doorway, the only remaining vestige of her New Dehli persona the jeweled bead at her nostril. Jeans and parka and limp hair, just not Nina anymore.

"But did you watch it?"

"I tried to," she confessed, "but I couldn't, I had to turn it off, it hurt too much. But if you want I'll watch it with you."

Clay shook his head, held up a flat hand as if to ward her off, then shut the door. Probably it would have been all right, but this was Nina, and if anyone was the mother of the bunch, she had served that purpose. She would want to comfort him, and while she loved Twitch, things happened. Consolation got out of hand, became something else, never planned for, then never to be talked about because it meant that a new door had been opened and could fly open again.

So he watched alone, as he was surely meant to.

The camera was trained on a chair in her living room, rigid and unmoving, a tripod's point of view. Empty chair, the brittle tick of a clock out of frame, its metronomic advance little slices out of the time they'd had left together while only one of them had been aware of it.

A blur of motion as Erin's skinny bottom receded from an abrupt close-up and she walked to the chair. Facing the camera, saying nothing, a sticklike index finger winding absently around a single hair, tugging it free, letting it fall to the floor. She did it again, her movements slow, even, soothing.

Her eyes roved into their own focus, found the lens. They could always find the lens. She could always pull herself together for that.

"I'm sorry, Clay, I, I can't say goodbye to your face because if you asked one wrong question … I wouldn't know how to answer. I don't do answers much anymore. If I ever did."

She went on, occasionally halting and staring off, at times slumping lower into the chair, less and less of her visible in the frame until she would become conscious of it, and straighten. Nothing seemed prepared, just Erin, alone with the ticking of that hostile clock, sometimes speaking, sometimes pondering what to say, sometimes trying to hang on to what she had just said. None of it pleasant to listen to: She needed more, there had to be more than this, and while she might have been able to admit to loving him someday, it could never happen with him as remote as an Arctic plateau.

"I do awful things sometimes," she told the camera, "and I need someone to tell me it doesn't matter what I've done. Even if it does, I need to hear that it doesn't."

It didn't go on much longer, for she had already begun to dissolve, big eyes gone hollow and moist, blinking back the goodbye tears as she buried her head for a moment, then raised it, pleading for something beyond words, palms uplifted, shaking.

"I don't even feel like a human being anymore," she said, then crumbled entirely.

Only after it was over did Clay remember sliding to the floor and sagging on his knees before the television, mouth working soundlessly as he watched her wrench herself free of the chair and advance toward the lens. Static frame once more showing nothing alive, just that mechanical ticking, ticking. He clung to the television to preserve the moment, eyes on the empty chair, knowing Erin was somewhere in the room, just out of sight; he could hear rustling movement and a sob caught in her throat. If he could just stop her from ending the recording, there might still be hope. The camera still rolled and contact was held. She might return to her chair and this time, why, this time she might even smile —

But then it all vanished, her chair, her clock, her entire life, zapping into white static as sudden as a nuclear blast.

Which might have been preferable, really.

In a holocaust, no one dies alone.

He spent some time screaming after that, wordless sounds that came erupting from the poisoned wellspring within. He imagined that men in wars screamed this way as they lay broken and dying in fields of mud and smoke and land mines, screaming for help or for their mothers, but never truly believing either would come.

No one else in the building banged on their walls, or shouted for him to stop.

He missed that, too.

*

Throat like a raw scrape, Clay stared at one of the paintings that had become his inheritances.

Iron rungs on an iron wall, centered between rows of rivets resembling cold hard nipples: a ladder. Turn it upside down, right side up, it worked either way, an Escher-like ambivalence. The ladder led from one door to another, virtual twins, opening into the glowing hellfires of blast furnaces.

No Escape, the artist might have named this one, if only he had extended the effort. Were Graham not dead already, Clay might just kill him and be done with it. It would be a favor to all of them who had suffered under his tyranny, his blackmail by melancholy.

Why couldn't you hang on? You fucking coward, why couldn't you just hang on? I should be missing you but now all I can do is hate you because look what you did, look what you cost *me.*

This was the downside of suicide he'd never considered. Graham had not just killed himself, but all of them. What had they been if not a family? Not the healthiest, nor free of abuse and neglect, but they were better together than they could ever have been alone. And now? Their numbers had been sheared, checks and balances destroyed. All that was left was one couple and a spare.

Plus, for the time being, a pair of inquisitive types who'd found them to be specimens worthy of study.

If he believed in portents, he might have wondered if this past week wasn't precisely that: You have been here long enough, lived your life in its latest rut and dug it as deep as you dare.

A specimen worthy of study — what more was there now? What else was left but well-intentioned friends who could barely take care of themselves, and the will to know why his heart could never be what he wished?

He concluded that he had three families: the family into which he had been born, and left by choice; the family of his heart, which he'd accepted out of mutual need and had just watched die; and the peculiar family of those he'd never met, but whose similarities ran so deep they were biological mandates.

Dim as the future appeared, there could be only one choice. The road was opening bit by bit, week by week. Someone in Boston was seeing to that.

Was it merely coincidence, then, with Graham dead a week and Erin gone a day, with the holiest of the year's holidays just two days away, that the mail brought his greatest surprise yet? Or was some other infernal machine grinding him toward an ultimate destination?

Standing in his living room, while in the window the sun blazed diamond-brilliant off melting snow, he opened the day's mail. A Christmas

card from Sarah — it made him smile even though he didn’t believe. And a large envelope with a Boston postmark, whose weekly arrival he had come to count on.

He shuffled through the papers long enough to see that they were research overviews, nothing specific as to case studies; dry reading ahead. Tales of chaos and mayhem were always more captivating. *My brothers,* he had once thought. *My crazy brothers.*

Clay saved the brief, handwritten cover letter for last, as always. He would scrutinize the cramped scrawl and try to picture the stranger who had penned it.

I think you deserve a Christmas present, the note said.

You know you're not alone in the world. But you don't fully know just how alone you're not. Not every Helverson's subject is on the books. Not every one of us is under 35. At least one of us is all of 44.

That's right. Us.

Give me a call sometime. You might even catch me in the mood to talk.

Still no name, but when Clay saw that a phone number had been provided, he realized that his hands had begun to tremble.

Joy to the world, indeed.

Twenty-Six

It was the one dependable aspect of working with the mentally ill, being able to find your boss in his office on Christmas Eve. They were still psychotic on holidays, and reality still as fluid. Adrienne found the weird stability in that comforting; something to believe in, count on.

"I'm wondering if you might be able to explain something to me that perhaps I should know about," Adrienne said.

She sat with both feet on the floor at her desk, hair tousled and in her eyes. Sarah had gone shopping and this phone was the only way she was sure Tempe still existed, or ever had.

"And that would be … what?" asked Ferris Mendenhall.

"Do you have any knowledge of something called the Cassandra Study?"

"No. I can't say that it sounds at all familiar. This is a study of what?"

"I assume it has something to do with Helverson's syndrome, but beyond that I haven't a clue."

"Where'd you come across the term?"

"I didn't. Clay did. It was mentioned in the latest mailing from whoever it is in Boston that … well, you know. Whoever."

"Mmm *hmm*." Mendenhall sounded irritable. He had said little on the subject of this rogue informant, but she could tell that the longer such a presence was felt, the more he loathed it. It was an element out of control, beyond his sphere of influence. It was, therefore, a small and hateful nugget of chaos. "In what context was this study mentioned?"

She did not need the paper before her to recollect it, so scant was the mention, but still it would have been preferable. Clay, though, had refused to leave the report behind when bringing it along this morning. At least he was sharing information again, which she counted as a major triumph. Possibly a miracle.

"It was in an overview on general conclusions drawn from the latest case studies on Helverson's subjects," she said. "The most up-to-date entries. Including Clay's. But there was this passing reference to something

called the Cassandra Study. It said that the study's first significant data wouldn't be available for another three to four years. There was no definition. As if it'd be generally understood by the intended readership."

Mendenhall sighed; here we are on Christmas Eve and I do not need this. "You know, Adrienne, someone is getting a lot of satisfaction out of what's basically cloak-and-dagger bullshit."

"I agree."

Whoever it was *wanted* Clay to know about this study, *wanted* him to learn for himself rather than having it spoon-fed via the mail. Its importance would be magnified a hundredfold if someone had to go digging for it. There was nothing at all incidental about this, the dropping of a single hint in all those pages.

"And Clay Palmer's given you no indication of having been told anything about whoever's been sending him information, is that what I'm to understand?"

"Either he doesn't know or he's keeping it from me. I tend to believe he doesn't know. Whoever it is maintains power by remaining anonymous. But it's not coming from a prankster's mindset. Whoever it is obviously feels a strong need to protect him- or herself. And won't drop the mask until feeling assured of Clay's dependence. So he'll continue to protect that anonymity."

Mendenhall told her that he would get on the phone with someone at Arizona Associated Labs, see if they could shed any light on this study. Told her she had done the proper thing in phoning him instead of routing a call directly to AAL. He knew how to bureaucratically finesse his way around far better than she.

She thought he was about to say goodbye when he said, "You sound tired, Adrienne. You sound exhausted." His voice in her ear like a nagging conscience that hadn't quite gotten it right.

"No I don't, I sound drained. That's what you hear. There's a difference."

"Hmmm." She could almost hear him frowning into the phone, closed-mouthed, his droopy moustache twitching. "Is there anything you need to talk about, unload?"

She nearly laughed, straightening at her desk with her hair tossed back from her forehead, swishing along her shoulders, her head rolling

limply back. *Was* there anything she needed to unload?

I have broken enough regulations to probably get me barred from practice. A week ago I stood present while a young man nearly liquefied himself and I did nothing to prevent it. I have watched as almost every inner support of my sole patient got torn from beneath him, and for some reason he still trusts that I have his best interests at heart. And I believe that I am ready to accept whatever comes from him next because I feel as if I've been hit and hit and hit again until I just can't be surprised anymore…

So precisely where would you like to begin?

"It's just been an intense emotional week for everyone around here, Ferris," she said. "And I'm not going to be home for the holidays. I'll get over it."

"I'll call back when I have anything for you. And if it's not later today, then, um … merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas," she said. Automatic, a parrot's reply, and she hung up.

She found herself staring across the room to the painting that Clay had given her. Graham's bridge to nowhere, an iron island in the sky for seekers marooned. She could almost hear the turbulent river below; had he meant it to be life itself, amniotic waters become raging eddies of confusion? Of course he had — she could see it so clearly now. Graham could view life in no other way. None of them could, try as they might. They all clung valiantly to a precipice, attempting to climb, but the waters rose as inexorable as a tide to sweep them away, one after another.

She could see it in the way Clay had come to her following Graham's suicide. He had needed their session the way recovering addicts crave methadone. He'd come to her this morning and wrenched his way through news of Erin's departure, and his eyes, she imagined, looked like those of schizophrenics in the glory days of electroshock therapy. A blinding light and a lockjaw taste of metal, a whiff of burnt ozone in the forebrain, then a blank slate with hazy recollections of something wrong, somewhere, with someone. Clay had no fight left, it seemed, merely the capacity for acceptance. He was beaten and she had allowed it to happen.

Ferris Mendenhall called back after more than three hours, in the middle of the afternoon. Across the city, across the miles separating them, Adrienne imagined millions of people succumbing to the sloppy

temptations of office parties. Would that she had no more worries than making a guileless fool out of herself. But no, no harmless sin for us, we guardians of the mind.

"I found out what the Cassandra Study is," Mendenhall said with slow contemplation. "When you were doing your cramming on genetics, and the double-Y … well, do I need to fill you in on the study that was run out of the Boston Hospital for Women between 1968 and 1975?"

"No," she whispered. "Oh Ferris. They're not doing it again, are they?"

"Yes and no."

Boston again. What was it with that city? The study to which he referred had been the project of a Harvard child psychologist and a pediatrician. They had karyotyped newborn boys in the maternity ward of the Boston Hospital for Women; those found to have an XYY genotype had been marked for systematic tracking, for years. Each boy's behavioral development was to be recorded by home visits, schoolteacher questionnaires, periodic psychological tests; no abnormality would remain undetected. They proposed what was termed anticipatory guidance: counseling to help families cope with whatever problematic behavior might arise.

Their project — and all similar studies — ended after seven years, largely from public outcry over shoddy ethics. Apparently the researchers had never considered the harm done to children by the application of stigmatizing labels, or the potential harm of overreacting to the typical aggression displayed by nearly all little boys. Apparently they had never considered the likelihood of self-fulfilling prophecy.

Yet someone was doing this again, with Helverson's subjects?

Yes and no.

"It was initiated two years ago," Mendenhall said. "Standard screenings of newborns in forty-seven hospitals in twenty-five cities across the country. All they're supposed to do is track the Helverson's babies. There's to be no contact, no counseling, no intervention … just statistical analysis of what happens to them down the road. It all goes into a central database at MacNealy Biotech in Boston. The parents aren't even informed when a baby's found to have the extra chromosome."

"So they've already located more, then?"

"Oh yes," he said, a fatalistic grumble of a laugh.

Her stomach tightened. "How many?"

"After two years, as of last week … six hundred and eighty-three. With a sixteen percent birth increase from year one to year two. Now, that may only be a statistical blip. A big blip, but…"

Adrienne sat, just sat. Holding the phone and listening to its soft electronic silence swallow her whole. Fill her empty hollows. Six hundred and eighty-three. And counting. In two years.

And these were just the known births. Someone who loved to crunch numbers would have compared that birth rate with national averages, maybe that of all industrialized nations, even globally. They would have estimates, how many were really out there. Unfound and unnamed, on no rosters. But out there.

The ones already studied? The adults? The Clay Palmers, the Mark Alan Nances, the Timothy Van der Leuns? They seemed like such rarities because they had been discovered by accident; oh, but what an informed and directed effort could pinpoint.

And in that gulf between the first adults who had been found to carry their rogue chromosome, and these infants, how many resided? How many teenagers, how many grade-schoolers had found themselves maladapted to a world not made for them? How long before they began to make that world over, in their own image?

Six hundred and eighty-three, and birth rates on the rise.

They were filling cribs, and soon enough would fill streets. Perhaps that turbulent makeover had already begun.

"Adrienne? You still with me?"

"Yeah." Always functioning.

"I'm afraid I have some bad news for you. Although it's nothing you weren't expecting eventually." Mendenhall cleared his throat. "AAL informed me this afternoon that they'll be cutting your funding at the end of the year. Which gives you another week to wrap things up with Clay Palmer."

"Wrap things up?" she said. "The kind of issues we're dealing with can't just be *wrapped up*." Her volume was rising. "It's the height of callousness to pretend otherwise."

"You knew this was coming, Adrienne." Mendenhall's voice had gone flatter, sterner. "Therapy never led the priority list. You knew that when you agreed to this."

She drew a strong breath through her nose, let it out the same way, right into the mouthpiece. "Thank you for giving me the news, Ferris. You're a good administrator … and that's about it."

She hung up, and wouldn't it have felt better to rip the phone from its wall plug, hurl it across the room? Of course it would. Clay would have done so.

She left her desk and drifted along in subconscious circles, slow and lazy, mildly dazed. After a few moments of staring out over the deck, Adrienne shoved open the sliding door and stepped across the redwood and the snow.

It was still coming down out here, clinging to her sweater and melting cold upon her skin, while the pines looked choked with it. She walked to one side of the deck, where the peculiarities of wind had sculpted days' worth of snow into a low, rounded drift. She sank into it as she might into a sagging throne.

Her legs and behind soon began to feel the creeping chill; maybe would go numb before long. She could stay here until Sarah came home and forced her in, brushed away the caked snow and asked what she was trying to do, catch pneumonia and ruin Christmas?

God rest ye merry lesbians, let nothing you dismay.

Adrienne tilted her head back upon the icy pillow and looked straight into the milky gray depths of the sky. No color, no warmth, no fury, nothing up there at all. Just snowflakes coming down to brush her cheeks, soft as angels' tears.

Six hundred and eighty-three.

And did the heavens think to grieve?

Twenty-Seven

Patrick Valentine picked him up at Logan Airport two days after Christmas. A Monday — he was hoping to avoid the crush of too many holiday travelers, but by the looks of the crowded gates and terminal, a lot of people were stretching out a long weekend. Lots of shopping bags in hand, clutched as proudly and carefully as if they contained gold, frankincense, and myrrh. Oh, it was touching.

He had yesterday, among their kind, played the game once more, the game devised a month ago. The Colt Python in the pocket; one bullet, one spin, one disciplined squeeze of the trigger. He had come to think of the game as snake-in-the-grass. Yesterday's flood of gift refunds and exchanges supplied a bounty of backs from which to choose. It had taken two hours of department store roaming before finding the one that screamed to be taken.

Another click. In the end, another reprieve.

Another month of sweet anticipation.

Next time he would ruin someone's Super Bowl, maybe.

As the late-afternoon flight from Seattle began to disgorge its passengers through the gate, Valentine scanned faces. Fifty or more he discarded until experiencing a frisson that went deeper than mere recognition. A face familiar because it was his own, twenty years younger and half-concealed behind heavy round shades of metal and amber glass, almost like blast lenses for a nuclear test site: Daniel Ironwood.

Valentine took several steps forward while other passengers split around him, like a swift stream encountering a rock, and he barred Daniel Ironwood's path. Face-to-face, they stared.

Strangers who liked to people-watch in airports would think them relatives. Naturally, the resemblance was there, if no warmth upon first meeting. Those same curious sleek faces and contoured skulls. They could be father and son, and anyone who stared, impolite or compelled by the sight of such fine-boned peculiarity, might believe them estranged. Years gone by since they last embraced, perhaps, while the younger grew to

manhood on an opposite coast, turning into more of his jaded elder than he would ever have dreamt possible.

How deceiving looks could be.

Daniel dug into a coat pocket for a crumpled pack of Salems, popped one into the corner of his mouth, and lit up. "Fucking airline regs, that must be the longest I've been without a smoke since I was twelve."

"Let's get your luggage," said Valentine, and led the way.

"Is she with you? She didn't come with you? What's her name — Ellie?"

Valentine glanced back over his shoulder, saw Daniel quicken his pace to keep up. "No, Ellie's not with me." Laughing then, "What's the matter, turbulence up there give you a hard-on?"

Daniel said nothing, might have glared with embarrassment or offense, but the dark glasses contained it well. No doubt he found them a survival tool, never betraying a thought if he could help it. Blank faces go unnoticed, unchallenged. Blank is a little bit like dead, and in dead there is a certain strength, for dead means nothing left to lose. Daniel would know this, had done his time as a juvenile offender; teen-age burglaries and robberies, a rape.

"This is weird, I don't mind telling you," he said. "This feels really really weird."

"I don't care how it feels, as long as it doesn't cause you any problems." And Valentine remembered the one from Indianapolis, that colossal disappointment back in late summer; the shame and impotence that seemed to have even embarrassed Ellie, who had until then seemed shockproof.

"And how's it make *you* feel? Doesn't it leave you feeling just a little like a pimp?"

Valentine laughed, clapped a hand down on Daniel's shoulder, drew them closer as they walked until he could feel the young man's body stiffen against him, resistant. Lean, hard … the same body he'd once had until growing into a thicker muscularity with stubborn traces of fat around the middle. The cancer rooted in his groin had changed him in all ways — metabolically, intellectually, even his inner essence.

And with this son given him by destiny, he wanted to lean in until Daniel squirmed, his rough stubbled cheek scraping Daniel's smoother one

as the kid smelled the coffee on Valentine's breath. He would slap his cupped hand down over Daniel's crotch and squeeze just to the point of pain. *Protect these,* he would say. *Because in that sac lives a hope that I lost a long time ago.*

Would a pimp do that?

"Pimps make money," he told Daniel instead. "You're *costing* me. Remember that and maybe you'll eventually figure out how I really feel."

"Right," Daniel said. He shrugged off Valentine's hand. "You don't plan on … you know … watching us go at it, or anything like that. Do you?"

And that really tore it, such an insinuation beyond the pale of reason. Valentine clenched his jaw and dragged him by the arm halfway across the terminal's walkway, thumped him against the wall by a row of telephone carrels before Daniel really knew what was happening. They drew passing glances, but Valentine could not have been more oblivious. Face-to-face, then, nose-to-nose. Heavy sunglasses or not, Daniel Ironwood could not hide his sudden trembling with fear. *Yeah, taste it now, and learn not to be a little brat, and maybe it'll spare us a worse clash down the road.*

"Is that why you think I flew you here?" Valentine whispered into the tightly impassive face. "I'm not a voyeur, I'm not a pervert. I didn't bring you here for my pleasure — I can't feel it in the first place. I brought you here to do a job, first, and maybe learn something. Now, are you going to keep that in mind?"

Nothing.

"Or are we going to have to go through frequent reminders?"

"I'll remember," said Daniel, and when they stepped away from the wall, Valentine noticed that he kept a half step behind; the farther they walked, the more he appreciated the ambiguity in that. Back there, Daniel Ironwood could either be playing the subservient or plotting to club him across the back of the head.

A fine specimen, Daniel Ironwood.

Maybe there was hope for the future after all.

*

He took Daniel to Charlestown so he could shower and clean up, dump off his luggage, anchor his life for the next couple of weeks. They grabbed a quick dinner at a pub a few blocks from the house, and by then

evening was chilling into a hard, crisp night. It was time. Introductions were in order.

They drove back across the Charles and up to the penthouse where he kept Ellie, and it generally went well. No mad burst of passion and fireworks, no instantaneous surge of lust. But he preferred a low-key beginning, had hoped for it, because if their hormones locked into immediate and earnest sync, what would prevent them from *really* pairing off, deciding his money did not matter, and striking off on their own?

Like ungrateful children.

So there they sat, in the living room, television and stereo playing in jarring discord. Ellie nervously flipped through channels for the first thirty minutes, then seemed to calm herself. Valentine had taken a sniff of her on arrival, of that razored violet hair, and it appeared that she'd washed it today. Good girl. Daniel was at first no calmer than Ellie, sat behind the big marble table as if it were a fortress, chain-smoking himself into a fuming cloud.

No mention was made of the real reason for their coming together, but its undercurrents charged the air all the same. Valentine watched with viper's eyes, watched their body language toward each other, made note of their eye contact — fleeting at first, then held longer. They spoke of doctors, psychiatrists; an unusual turning point, but … whatever works.

"The last doctor they made me see, he told me why I turned out so screwed up," said Daniel, deadpan behind his glasses. "He said I'd been molesting my inner child."

Ellie frowned for a few moments, unsure whether or not to take him seriously, finally laughing when she saw him break his veil and grin crookedly toward the floor.

"Are you ever going to take those damned glasses off?" she asked. "Patrick, make him take those things off."

Daniel took care of it himself, drawing them slowly away from his face, as if performing an amputation.

"Okay," Ellie said, "okay. I just wanted to be sure you had eyes. You didn't really seem quite human."

Daniel shrugged. "The jury's still out."

Shaking her head, Ellie narrowed her eyes, smiled the aloof and vicious smile that came to her in odd moments, moments that to Valentine

felt to stretch much longer, somehow, for in them she seemed older than he, and far more mysterious than he had ever suspected.

"The jury can be bought," Ellie said, pointing at Valentine. Pointing at his heart. "Just ask him."

*

He wasn't used to the phone ringing before he woke in the morning. When it came to associates he generally initiated the calls, and wrong numbers were rare.

Valentine dragged the receiver to his ear and croaked out a simple "What."

"I have a number but I don't know a name," came a voice, the voice of a stranger, "so I don't know if you're the one I need to talk to or not."

"About what?"

From the other end came a slow breath. If he didn't like the answer, this conversation was terminated. Feds — he wouldn't put it past them to bug his phone, call him up when they knew he'd be groggy. Call it entrapment.

"Chromosome twelve."

Valentine sat up, scooting back against the headboard while scrubbing the sleep from his face. This was long-distance; he could hear the miles of humming lines between. Could it be…?

"How did you get this number?"

"You mailed it to Denver. Does that narrow it down?"

Valentine broke into a broad smile, a morning rarity, as the heavy burden of sleep began to flush from his system in a surge of excitement. This would be how Magellan had felt upon sailing past the known boundaries demarked by the maps of his day.

"Clay Palmer," he said with genuine pleasure. "It's good to speak to you, finally."

"Are you going to tell me your name?" Clay asked.

"It's still too early for that. You understand. I have to protect myself. Nothing personal."

"I'm coming your way," said Clay Palmer, with all the inborn inevitability that Valentine knew had made them what they were, had made them cogs in a greater machine that would one day finally get around to meshing. "I'm coming because all I have left is to see if what I have ahead

of me is even worth trying to get to, and I don't know if you can tell me, but I don't know anyone else who could even try. So maybe you'll tell me who you are when you know I'm calling from a local phone."

Sitting in bed, his first impulse was to say no, bad timing. He had a new houseguest, after all, and eugenics on the mind. But reconsideration was swift, as soon as he remembered an evolutionary given that did not escape the human species:

Sperm production was boosted higher in competing males.

"I'll look forward to it," he said, and let it be all the invitation that Clay Palmer was likely to need.

PART THREE/AND DARWIN LAUGHED

Hunters for gold or pursuers of fame, they all had gone out on that stream, bearing the sword, and often the torch, messengers of the might within the land, bearers of a spark from the sacred fire. What greatness had not floated on the ebb of that river into the mystery of an unknown earth! … The dreams of men, the seed of commonwealths, the germs of empires.

— Joseph Conrad

Heart of Darkness

Twenty-Eight

Late December should have made a terrible time to travel cross-country by car, although Sarah found it perfect. The three of them shielded from hostile winds and ice in their steel cocoon, skimming over snowy plains, a scarred white earth as far as the eye could see and the imagination reach.

This is right, she thought. *It shouldn't end in a condo with him walking out one last time. It should finish out here, or wherever this road ends up taking us.*

There had been no talking Clay out of this once he'd made up his mind. He was going to Boston, by way of Indianapolis, and that was final. He would drive and drive, and if his car fell to pieces along the way, he would walk, and if he froze, he would die where he fell.

There had been no talking Clay out of it, but Sarah didn't think Adrienne had really tried. Perhaps because she recognized its futility and was now past doing things for the sake of obligation. Or perhaps because, by insisting she accompany him as he went to confront his mysterious mentor, she might wring a few extra final days out of their allotted time before bureaucracy slammed the door on them for good. She would thwart institutional callousness with one last act of defiance.

"You've really gone rogue now, haven't you?" Sarah asked her, barely an hour out of Denver but already they were crossing chilly white plains, the mountains forgotten. Adrienne behind the wheel of her own car, no less — it was newer and more reliable than Sarah's, and certainly Clay's.

"I guess I have," said Adrienne. "Do you think I'm wrong?"

"Well of course not, it's not like you've kidnapped a minor, now, is it?"

"No, but … I'm not sure exactly *what* it is I've done."

At the moment Clay lay sleeping across the backseat. He had looked very tired when they'd left; had looked that way each time Sarah had seen him during the past few days, as if he were slowly wearing away from some

effort within that she could only imagine. Sleeping, he looked worse; fragile, even.

They weren't so tough, men weren't. She had met several women who had problems with men on the basis of gender alone, as if that XY chromosome pattern was in itself deserving of hatred. But Sarah had often caught wind of a strange underlying resentment in such attitudes, resentment of men's heavier bodies, their denser bones, thicker muscles. She had always found it a shortsighted view: as if brute strength really equated with inner power, and precluded sensitivity entirely. It wasn't necessarily so.

She had been intimate with a man only once in her life. Her sole heterosexual fling, it was memorable not only for its singularity, but for just how truly wrenching the experience had been … though not for the expected reasons.

It had come late in high school, before she had been certain who she really was. In this cliquish world, classmates were already talking about her behind her back, although she was finding that she cared less and less. She accepted a rare date, and when he later wanted to park she didn't try to talk him out of it. This was something she *should* experience, just to know, even if she felt no genuine desire beyond curiosity, certainly not the more incendiary desires that sometimes arose when she talked with other girls or glimpsed their bodies in the showers after gym class. This was something about which she should be informed.

The night had been autumn cool, the backseat of her date's car roomy. She would always remember the way his hands trembled as he touched her while pushing into her. She would always remember the endearing hesitancy of his kisses, and the pounding of his heart that she could feel against her own chest. He had wanted so much for everything to be perfect — this was obvious in retrospect — yet even before they were done, she lay there knowing it wasn't for her. No repulsion, and while it would have been hard to deny that at least a few of the sensations were pleasurable, neither was there any real gratification. It was simply wrong; this was not her, not who she was, nor the person she was growing into. It was like trying to align two puzzle pieces with a hammer instead of relying on a natural fit.

Maybe she shouldn't have been so honest afterward. She could have lied to spare his feelings. But likely he would have known anyway, sensed

her remoteness. He was young and he was eager, but he was also shy enough to be terrified and considerate enough to ask how she felt rather than presume to tell her.

So Sarah hit him with the truth, and just as clearly as she would remember his hands and heart, so too would she remember the crushed expression he wore. And the way he cried, silently, turning away from her to face the nearest window as the glass fogged from his breath. She would always remember the immensity of the power she felt: a simple rejection could devastate, could shake people to their foundations and make them wonder if everything they had always believed about themselves hadn't been wrong all along.

Never again, she had thought. *I know now, and I never want to have to do this to anyone else ever again.*

It's not your fault, this is just the way I am, she tried to convince him, her hand on his bare shoulder until he pulled away. While eventually it seemed to sink in, how sad he looked all the same, when finally he could face her. Trying to smile, half-sick, through wet eyes, and only then did she realize it wasn't just sex — the wound cut deeper. Maybe he loved her, or thought he had, or had attached hopes to her that she'd never anticipated. He was not an especially popular young man; few noticed him; he blended well into backgrounds. Maybe he had been thrilled just to be with her.

She could see it all in his eyes, those hopes. Only he seemed clearly unable to speak of them.

"I won't tell anybody if you don't want me to," he said at last. "About you, I mean."

How naïve this was. Surely he had heard rumors of her by now, but if not, then he had to know that rumors were sure to spread whether or not he contributed. Bless his aching heart. If he could not share with her any of his misbegotten hopes, at least he could grant her what he saw as one final gift: a vow of silence.

It was something men excelled at … even when it ate them alive.

So men weren't so tough, no. But they could try to be noble. Noble was better by far.

As she turned toward the backseat, to watch over Clay's sleeping form, disturbed only by the small twitches, she knew that the noblest

endeavor of all was to attempt to conquer everything that was worst in yourself.

"I think you're doing the right thing," she finally said to Adrienne.

"Then why do I feel guilty of something?"

"Because the situation, and the people who led you into it, forced you to make decisions you never had to make before. If you'd been a team player all the way, *their* way, you wouldn't be feeling any better. Different, but no better. You'd be feeling dirty, Adrienne. So how would you rather feel: like a fugitive, or dirty?"

Hands clenching on the wheel, she watched plains of filthy white wash past the car. "I'd rather not feel either way."

"You couldn't abandon him in two more days just because they cut your money. You couldn't let him make this trip alone." Sarah doodled in the film misted on her side window. "Maybe when we get back to Denver, he'll feel like it's time to close out what you've been doing — did you ever think of that? Look at it like cultures where the people don't segregate their spiritual values from everyday life. Pilgrimages often mark the end of one phase of a person's life and the beginning of the next. Maybe it'll be that way with Clay. Maybe this is his way of putting the last few months behind him, so he can get on with the rest of his life."

"Oh, my optimist." Adrienne smiled at her, her lean face too thin, cheekbones sharper than before. She wore the recent strains as well, and made them her own. But she was so plaintively hopeful in that smile that all was softened. "I hope you're right."

They both turned to look once more at the slumbering Clay when he voiced some low and inarticulate cry from the heart of a nightmare at midmorning. One fist brushed spastically at the side of his face, fell still, curled open. Sarah reached over to drape him with a small blanket they had taken along, and it seemed to calm him. For the moment, at least.

"To dream," she said, "perchance to sleep."

*

The day ground onward and they lost it to driving, lost an hour in western Kansas when crossing time zones. Kansas would best be driven by night, they decided, when the darkness would conceal the fact that nothing was out there but barrenness, and let you imagine there was something more. Darkness was kind that way.

Six hundred miles brought them to Kansas City, where they stopped to pass the night. Tomorrow, five hundred more and another time zone would put them in Indianapolis, where Clay would have the next day to take care of business that belonged to him alone.

Adrienne used a credit card to get them motel rooms on the outskirts of Kansas City, in that urban perimeter all interstate cities seemed to possess, having evolved for the sole purpose of catering to wayfarers. The same chain motels and the same fast food emporiums, cars fueling up at the same gas stations staffed by the same bored attendants. The great national homogenization, as Sarah saw it — there was something blandly hideous about the trend. After checking in they motored off in search of someplace nearby to eat, but the pickings were merely functional. It would fill a belly and that was all. They should have been too tired and too hungry to care, yet still it seemed an affront.

"Remember I told you I didn't touch an interstate when I went from Denver to Tempe?" Clay asked Adrienne, and she said she did. "This is why."

Sarah looked in dismay at the neon, the plastic, the refuse that choked gutters and asphalt and could have blown from any trashcan within two thousand miles. "We're cutting down every bit of diversity like weeds in a field."

Clay nodded. "This whole country's becoming one big putrid mall. Graham used to say that." She watched him smile at the memory. Missing Graham, for all his spite, or maybe because of it. "I want African food," he then said. "I want millet and beans and fried plantains. I want to eat it with my fingers. And what is there to choose from? Burger King and Taco Bell. I think I'd have a better meal if I could burn them to the fucking ground instead."

"Clay," said Adrienne. "Let's be reasonable."

"Okay," he said. "Give me some matches."

He was harmless at the moment, Sarah decided, but he had a point. He nearly always had a point. If somewhere deep within Clay really was touched with madness, it was a madness prone to blunt truth. And as they cruised along some boulevard whose name she did not know, colored by splashes of ugly lights, she wondered if Clay might not feel this descent into urban sameness even more acutely than she. To her it was sad, like the

erosion of pure and isolated cultures when the world at last penetrates like a rapist to wreak its change … through disease, through missionaries, through the nouveau conceit of *This is mine, I will no longer share it, I will hurt you if you touch it again.*

But to Clay, seeing city after city, suburb after suburb, each wearing much the same face … wouldn't that grind at him on a more fundamental level? For when it came to that most unique facet of anyone — the face — Clay would know that his was not his alone. It belonged first to a dozen others. And now hundreds.

How would it feel? That they had been born as standardized entities to fill interchangeable cities? In the light of that horrible meltdown, their visceral rage could be understandable, necessary even — a final straining by their human spirits to break free and reject the shackles of conformity.

Then again, maybe they were merely flukes and anomalies, with no futures.

This time of year, with this weather, interstate travel was safer, swifter, but how much more heartening it might have been to travel the lesser highways, as Clay had done months before, if only to prove to themselves that all was not surrendered out here. She wanted to walk roads peopled by those whose worlds ended two horizons over; to eat in shacks whose menus were painted on sheets of whitewashed plywood. She wanted the time to hang around gas stations owned by bony old men who knew engines better than their wives, to sniff the fumes and prowl the rest rooms when no one was looking, and stare at cigarette butts in the urinals as if they were runes of divination, thrown just so and full of meaning.

She would remain out in the hinterlands until she could read those omens, and know if the future they spoke of was hopeful, or barely worth the bother. Weave those threads into her thesis when she got back, maybe, explore the linkage between anthropology and prophesy.

It was a dream, anyway.

And then they gave up looking, and went for burgers.

Twenty-Nine

Outside of Minnesota's twin cities, Clay had never been east of the Mississippi. It had been a great river of adventurous unknown in another era. Passing over it the day before, as it churned frigid and gray with slabs of ice, he wondered how Mark Twain had seen it in his time. How its primal pull had felt surging up through the deck of a steamboat; if its ancient muddy allure was anything like the one now compelling him to the East Coast.

The river was behind him now, a state and a half back, but its chilly currents lingered in imagination. It was how he may have traveled a century or more ago, poling himself along atop a raft, anticipating change around every bend. He would have known nothing of chromosomes then; genetics would have provided no scapegoat. Ignorance might really have been bliss.

No more, though. A little knowledge was a dangerous thing, it had been said, and Clay supposed that was true. It could leave you with an addict's craving for more.

Here he was, living proof: Indianapolis, midday on New Year's Eve, alone with the car for the first time since they had left Denver. He thought it was an encouraging vote in his favor that Adrienne had let him take her car.

Timothy Van der Leun lived in a tiny house on the southwest side, where I-70 slashed through a flatland of warehouses and grim smokestacks. Clay had phoned from last night's motel, after consulting his illicit files for the number. He got a confused sort of hello, then hung up after a moment of listening to Van der Leun listening to him breathe. He knew of nothing to say. Better to just go.

He found the street on a local map, then in the car. The block was filled with houses just like one another, small and cramped, creeping toward decrepitude, as if they held dour secrets and were exhausted from the strain. No trees at all to speak of, just scrawny head-high twigs of things. Poisoned by the air, maybe, or by the snow whose last dregs stuck to the lawn like gray scum.

The narrow porch sagged beneath his weight, and Clay knocked. He did not trust the bell to function.

He had to knock again before the door opened, as slowly as if the person behind it were crippled, arthritic. An ever-widening slice of the house greeted him, dim as a cave, all the blinds and curtains drawn.

And then the master of the house.

The face was familiar.

He clung to the door with more weight than should have been borne by his gaunt frame; lost inside his clothes, long, loose sleeves flapping at his knobby wrists. He peered out with eyes that seemed to need moments to shift focus from wherever they had been before, and when they did, his gaze locked on with the fierce melancholy of someone staring at a shattered mirror while waiting for the pieces to meld again.

Yet still Clay could say nothing. What possible words would not be trivialized by their shared countenance? *Mutation, huh?* and then a lost grin. *What a bitch.*

"Are you a real one?" Timothy Van der Leun asked. Clay did not know what he meant. "Real. With scars. Let me see your scars if you're real."

Freezing wind behind him, the smelly heat of the house before him, Clay stood on the porch and took off his gloves. Turned his hands down to show the red slashes across their backs; skinned his hair away from his forehead to reveal the most recent one above his eye. His badges, all; his scarlet letters of admission.

"I have more," he said, "but I'm not taking off my clothes for you."

But Timothy Van der Leun was already nodding, "Okay, you're real," turning away, shuffling back inside the house and leaving the door open for him to follow.

Clay shut it behind him; waited for his eyes to adjust to the dim halls, dim rooms. It reeked of heat throughout, a thermostat allowed to go mad, but the air was worse, thick with the scent of things burned, then allowed to spoil. If he were offered food here, he would never accept.

"Which are you?" Timothy's voice, from the shadows, and this time Clay knew the meaning.

"Denver."

Timothy tilted his gaze, quizzical, a thin head on a bony stalk above the flapping sails of his shirt. "A new one."

Clay realized what they were standing in must have been the living room, surrounded by overflowing junk-pile boxes and brittle old wrappings from convenience foods. They littered the floor like tiny shrouds, and when Timothy moved over to a chair they crackled underfoot. Down he sank, his arms wrapped protectively around his middle.

"When did they finger you?"

"This past fall." Clay found another chair but beneath him it seemed to fit wrong, as if for skewed bones, or perhaps his own had begun to warp into other shapes, other forms. Anything might happen beneath this roof, far from the face of the sun. "It was an accident."

"We were all by accident," Timothy said. One hand dropped to the floor beside his chair, crabbed around, came up with a bottle. He put it to his mouth and took a ferociously long pull from it, then offered to share.

Clay looked at the bottleneck, the squared glass … dripping, dripping, amber blood that flies might die from if they lapped it up. He shook his head. "I can't."

Timothy nodded. "I heard that was a problem with some of us," then the whiskey spilled down the front of his palpitating throat as he poured it again. "It never was with me."

Clay watched him drink, silently, as the house hung as still around them as a rotting carcass, save for the televised murmur from another room, probably the bedroom. He found himself drawn again and again to that other face, so like his own, yet not. He had thought for days that this meeting might be like walking in upon a brother he had lost from birth, that the both of them would know enough not to speak, that what they shared beneath the skin would fill the silences.

But it was not like that at all — more the tearing of a membrane between himself and what might have been, or worse, might yet be. Not brothers at all, they went deeper: fibers unraveled from the same umbilical cord that might have strangled lesser babies. They could look at each other, and the small differences — black hair or blond, clean or encrusted — were made insignificant. Anything that varied in their lives they need neither ask nor tell about, for they had lived in all the same skins.

"Where," said Clay, "did you learn about the others? Who told you?"

Timothy opened his mouth, then shut it while he prodded the question for veiled implication. "Where are you going now, *where are you going?*" He curled in on himself. "If you're from Denver — you're not going to Boston, are you?"

"I don't have anyplace else left to go."

"It's where we all go last, I think," and Timothy trembled, as if another thought might be torn free, then surged from the chair. Stray papers fluttered to join a hundred others on the floor. "I can't sit here, come back here with me, okay, come back here," leading down a narrow hall where tilted old pictures leered from the walls. "Seeing you here, it's just … it's just…" Repeating it over and over, a mantra.

Clay followed into what had been a kitchen, maybe not even all that long ago, but it had since been taken over by piles of newspapers and magazines spilling from cartons whose corners had ruptured. Unseen mice scurried under the cartons; their droppings speckled the counter. Timothy sat at the table, silhouetted against a window covered by a cataract of brittle, brownish paper.

And the smell was worse back here, in Timothy's wake, that sweet black stink of burnt dinners left to spoil in a room of nicotine light.

Timothy swept an arm across half the table, cleared it to the floor so that Clay might have a place to rest his elbows when he sat. Apologizing when Clay was seated, "I'm sorry it's such a mess around here, I'm on disability, I should pay someone…"

"You've been to Boston? Who is it that's there? I really need to know before I get there, but he won't tell me his name."

"Not even on a name basis with him yet, huh?" Timothy drank, then went scraping through an assortment of electrical components scattered over his half of the table. Wires like snipped arteries, pieces of broken circuit boards. From a tangle of cords he brought out a soldering iron and turned it on, watched it begin to heat. Clay sat mesmerized as a single fleck of some dead fire burned off its tip, sent a wispy coil of smoke toward the ceiling.

"His name is Patrick Valentine. I was there in the summer. I think it was last summer." When Timothy scratched at his forehead, his fingers came away flaked with dead skin. "You really didn't know his name?"

Clay shook his head. *No, I didn't.*

"Then what are you doing going there so soon? Don't you think you should know a man's name before you let him put you to stud like some horse?" When he raised his eyes from the table and noted the incomprehension in Clay's, Timothy's head sagged toward one shoulder, then he slapped Clay, once, with a stinking hand. It might once have been a strong blow. "You really are a virgin, then, aren't you? You really don't know about that girl he's got up there, that he found somehow, you don't *know* about her?"

Clay shook his head no, still no, and perhaps he should leave this table. Timothy Van der Leun began rocking back and forth as the soldering iron radiated a shimmer from its smooth beveled tip.

"I really wanted to do it," he whispered, looking somewhere off to Clay's right. "I did, I wanted to, and he wanted me to do it, and so did she —" Twisting like a junkie starting to sweat, wretched memories leavening the fix. "My father used to think he was a real holy man until he realized they couldn't cure me. They used to feel sorry for him, I think, but he never … he never told them the way he used to whip me for those dreams I'd have, or *where*, the way he'd come in to check the sheets every morning."

Clay felt a struggle in his own hands; wanting to reach out, grip Timothy by the shoulders and shake him until he got back on track. *What girl, who are you talking about?* Going so far as to raise one hand, but no further. There was something diseased about this man, exuding from every pore. He was as untouchable as a shadow.

"I really wanted to," he said again, though from the deadness at the core of his eyes, desire had burned out long ago. "But I just couldn't get past being there in her bed, looking at her face."

Clay watched him tap the soldering iron against the tabletop the way normal people tapped pencils. More scars for the imitation wood, little furrows smoldering with the acrid reek of burnt plastic. Thinking, *Two years between us, just two years — is this what my next two are going to be like? Because if they are, then maybe Graham saved a place for me.*

How terribly sad it must be for people who meet brothers, sisters, about whom they have known nothing all their lives, only to find their siblings to be worse shambles than they themselves are. The conclusion would be inescapable: *We're congenital losers.*

"I *wanted* to," this time like a vow, "but her face, it was right there … it would've been like humping my own sister, and I just couldn't … *do* anything."

And Timothy went on, dissolving slowly in his chair, oily tears mingling with sweat that broke freely across his face. Clay sweating too, the house closing around them, warm as an oven. If they died here, the house would bake them into leathered mummies before they were found, brethren of a hideous dynasty.

my own sister

This was an even greater revelation than the name of Patrick Valentine.

Then she's mine, too.

He was about to leave when Timothy smiled hopefully, with jittering thin lips, and pointed across the table, saying, "Give me that jar of Vaseline." Clay slid it over, wiped the film on his pants before it could absorb into his fingers.

Timothy Van der Leun rolled up one sleeve like a junkie ready to plunge the needle, an eager light gleaming in his eyes. All the way up to the bicep, the forearm bared — Clay's face went slack when he saw the sores, the scabs, the thickened blisters. They covered the inner arm like an oozing crust.

"I don't usually start this until night," Timothy told him, "but since you're here…"

He dipped the tip of the soldering iron into the Vaseline — "So it doesn't stick as bad," he said — and as it began to bubble on the tip, he found a clear spot on his arm. Held it there until it began to smoke. The sizzle wasn't as bad as Clay thought it would be. The mice were louder, in their way. But the burnt pork smell was in his nose before he could do anything.

"I know how we went wrong — just look at the way we start out growing from the sperm and the egg," said Timothy. "One cell, two cells, four, eight…" The soldering iron dipped back to the Vaseline. "That's the way we grow. This thing in our cells, I can fix it the same way, I know that now."

Back to his arm, contact, with a soft incinerating hiss and a curl of smoke.

"A few cells at a time," he said, as if he had never known such rationed bliss. "A few cells at a time."

Clay did not leave until Timothy resumed where, the night before, he had left off on his chest.

Thirty

Listening for his return was ostensibly a passive task, but it seemed she was getting little else done. Adrienne sat at the motel room's table while the cursor of the laptop computer blinked hypnotically — final evaluations of Clay, they might yet be of use.

She paced to the window a fourth time and found the parking lot still barren of her car.

"Gee Mom, do you think Clay stayed late after the prom?" asked Sarah from across the room. She was sprawled facedown on the bed, bare feet kicked up over her bottom as she pored through one of her thesis books.

It came so easy to her, waiting did. Life. Everything. Had Sarah ever failed at a single endeavor? Probably she had — she was not, after all, inhuman — but she never once gave the impression that failure was within her range of possibilities. She lived and breathed and ate and slept and made love as if the world would fall naturally into place around her. To lesser mortals she could be intimidating that way.

"He'll be back when he's ready," she said. "You'll know."

Adrienne crossed the room, sank onto the bed beside her, let Sarah play with her hair because she knew Adrienne liked that, the way it unknotted her body, her mind, her soul.

"I wasn't ready for all this," Adrienne said, a confession. "When I agreed to leave Tempe, I didn't think of the way I'd be letting them take all my other patients away from me." Both of Sarah's hands went slowly swirling across Adrienne's scalp. "Clay's been all I've had left in the world to validate me. He's been *it*. I should have known better than to put myself in that situation."

A position dangerous to them both. Perhaps, subconsciously, it had been too much like a shift into private practice, where there was no profit incentive in a cure, only the continual hope of one.

"I don't validate you?"

"Sure you do. But he validates a part of me you'd never be able to. A part I wouldn't want you to."

Sarah pushed the book aside and slowly lay across her, like a widow flung over the broken body of a mate claimed by war. "If someone told you that in a session, you'd tell her she was compartmentalizing her life, and relying too much on people who might let her down."

"So I'm notoriously blind to my own faults."

"Just so long as you know."

Sarah held to her, and she to Sarah, asymmetric but fitting together nevertheless. Sarah's cheek was pressed along her thigh, hip near her head. Adrienne nuzzled harder against Sarah's hip, breathing deeply to drag the musky scent of her within. A smell could take you anywhere, to any time. Sarah was the one real thing she had on this trip that reminded her of home; even the rainstick had been left in Denver. Holding Sarah so, breathing her in, she could touch Tempe better than if she'd brought a jar of dirt from the desert. *We'll be there again, soon, in our own home, in our own bed ... and I will be wiser.*

They stayed this way until she heard her car pull up outside, heard the slam of its door. Footsteps, aimless and undecided, then a quick knock. Halfway to answering, Adrienne heard the clunk of the neighboring door through the thin walls. When she opened her own, Clay was not there — only her keyring, lying on the threshold.

She picked them up, held them in the open doorway while a frozen wind flooded past.

Sarah watched from the bed, eyes big and incisive, now her largest feature with her hair still hanging in its curtain of braids. "I know what your first impulse is. But give him some time alone. He needs that respect." A smile. "And close the door. My feet are freezing."

"Put some socks on for a change."

She gave Clay a half hour, then another fifteen minutes just to test herself. And when at last she knocked and he let her in, she saw that he looked more pale than he had late this morning, when borrowing her keys. He sat diminished, as if his bones had shrunk, rocking himself in place with tiny, controlled movements. His staring eyes possessed the frightful wisdom of one who has seen something terrible; with some people, you could just *tell*. She found his room preternaturally still, none of the vitality here that

she felt next door. Without Sarah's presence, how cheerless and arid this place really seemed.

"You found him at home," she said.

He would not look at her, sitting on the edge of the bed, his army field jacket crushed beneath him. "Yeah."

"And he wasn't quite what you'd hoped for?"

"I don't know what I was hoping for. But I don't think I could have hoped for … for *this*."

She had never been clear on why he had sought out Timothy Van der Leun, what he had hoped to accomplish; all along Clay had been reticent to discuss it. A Boston destination she could understand, but in Van der Leun's case, there had been no tantalizing prior contact. She supposed, simply enough, that it was crucial for Clay to at last come face-to-face with another like himself.

Even if that other self proved hopelessly lost.

"He's destroying himself," Clay said. "Destroying himself and thinking it'll cure him. But maybe … maybe he's right, in a way."

He said he'd rather go for a walk than sit, so she retrieved her coat and met him outside. They headed for the sidewalk along the street, downtown Indianapolis rising in the distance. A few yards away, heavy traffic ground through old slush as clouds of exhaust fogged past them. Here they strolled, upon the urban moors. New Year's Eve — she had almost forgotten — and was there not a hint of frivolity in the petroleum air?

A block had gone by before he told her what Timothy Van der Leun had been doing to himself. She thought of Clay's own bent toward self-mutilation. Likely this now struck him as an inherited tendency, a mad passion buried deep in the genes to which they all might be prone, as vulnerable as the members of some doomed family in the most grotesque Southern Gothic imaginable.

"I don't imagine seeing him that way left you feeling any too reassured," she said.

"Oh, I don't know. Maybe it's the kind of thing I expected all along, and didn't realize it." A crooked smile, thrown up in hurried self-defense. "He had his agenda and he was sticking to it. Same self-immolation agenda as mine, isn't it? Only he's going at it a little more directly."

Damn his cynical hide, anyway. It was her last official day on the job and even if it took until midnight she vowed to get beneath it.

"Agenda," she said, and began to quicken her stride. Her legs were nearly as long as his — let him work to keep up. "So where does this agenda come from?"

"Remember chromosome twelve? I'd say we're looking like a stronger case for biological determinism all the time. If that's the way it is, then I'm prepared to accept that."

"Maybe, but you don't want to have to, do you? You may never admit it to yourself, but you're looking for a way to avoid that conclusion, and you're *desperate* to find it." When he said nothing she forged ahead. "You don't share the same fate as Timothy Van der Leun unless you allow it. I still maintain you're in control." A deep breath, let's try something. "Nobody knows just yet, but for the sake of argument, let's say that all of chromosome twelve is involved, all three copies. You've done some homework. How many chromosomes do you have left?"

"Twenty-two pairs."

"Forty-four chromosomes to three. Even if you're given over to biological determinism, you still have to account for a lot of genetic encoding in those other forty-four that doesn't have a thing to do, directly or indirectly, with chromosome twelve. It should speak as loud, if not louder. So let it have its say."

Clay grunted, staring at the sidewalk as they glided along. "Are you forgetting what my father and mother were like? I think I'd rather take chromosome twelve."

She rolled her eyes. He was good. Oh, he was good. "But maybe a lot of what was dominant in their genes turned out to be recessive in yours. And vice versa."

"And maybe not."

"But maybe so. A congenital soldier and a passive alcoholic? Neither one sounds very much like you."

He nodded, working his tongue inside his cheek; backed into a corner at last and he knew it. "Well, we could debate this all day and never really be sure of anything, other than that Helverson's syndrome isn't a good thing to have," he finally said. "Just a few cracked eggs in the genetic omelet. They'll have us figured out eventually."

"To a degree. Probably never completely."

"They're reading those DNA codes right this minute, you know. They'll have their map. They'll know us inside and out."

The Human Genome Project — such lofty goals propelled it, but it made her nervous as well. In full-bloom, the power of genetic knowledge would eclipse even that of nuclear fusion, yet thus far no one was even regulating it. Historically, great power was often wielded by clumsy hands at best; at worst, savage ones. For their owners understood only the mechanics of what they manipulated, never the grand underlying mysteries.

"And suppose they do have that map someday," she said. "You can look at a map of the Grand Canyon, but you can never get any true sense of what it's like until you stand at its rim. You can look at the full orchestral score of Beethoven's Fifth, laid out right in front of you, every note … but it's only the bare frame. You can't hear the music in it."

"And what do you think might happen," Clay said, "if you took a page or two from that score, and repeated it at random? It'd wreck the whole symmetry, wouldn't it?"

"It could. But depending on the skill of the musicians, they might just make it work."

He weighed this, kicked idly at a chunk of ice to send it skittering ahead of them along the sidewalk. "Well … Beethoven'd probably still be pissed."

It felt as if they had arrived at a friendly stalemate. She the proponent of self-determination, he the unwilling proselyte still waiting to be convinced. It was an existential dilemma, all right, and she began to wonder if her victory might not come about only in his living of it. That realization on Clay's part could lie years ahead, and she might never hear of it.

Clay frowned, a little bitter, a little bemused. "You know what the genetics labs are finding, now that they're starting to really get into the DNA codes? I read this not long ago."

"What's that?"

"Down on the level of those three billion base pairs that make up the DNA chains? A lot of it, all it is, is junk. Whole long strings of those pairs … they don't make up amino acids, they don't do anything, they're just there. It's all junk, it's static, it's waste. It means nothing."

"I didn't know that." Leave it to him to have found a wrinkle she'd missed.

"Don't you see? It's like life, broken down to the ultimate fractal: a few points of significance, and a lot of filler." He appeared oddly pleased with this conclusion; not triumphant, more worn down with the weight of it, as he walked with shoulders rounded.

They slowed, forced to stop at a corner by a red light as the traffic shifted, flowing before them in automated currents, like a school of minnows — many fish, one mind. The two of them had gone far enough, it seemed, and turned to retrace their steps.

"It's the ultimate joke on us," Clay said. "It has to be. It took so many thousands of years to get to the place where we could finally read it."

"So who told the joke?"

"Ask that and you're getting into a whole new area," he said. "*That's* the riddle."

*

They went their separate ways back at the motel, she to her room and Clay to his. He professed need of a shower, a long one, that he had left Timothy Van der Leun's feeling very unclean. It could take quite some time, she knew. There were residues that could defile a person in places where water could never flow.

Sarah asked how it had gone and Adrienne covered most of the highlights. Briefing Sarah had become second nature by now, had even begun to feel like the proper thing to do.

"Is he okay?" she wondered.

"He's a survivor." Adrienne hung up her coat, pried the calf-high boots from her legs. "It's what he does. For all I know it may even be what he's programmed for." Stopping then, "I shouldn't have said that, *listen* to me, he's winning me over to his point of view."

"Maybe he's programmed to do that, too."

"No, I think that's general human nature," she said. "You've obviously not spent enough time in meat markets listening to the male of the species convince you that his other car really is a Porsche."

"You make it sound *so* inviting. But anyway," said Sarah, in that dismissive, wheedling way she adopted sometimes, a sign she was readying

for a radical turn of thought. "As long as you're being so open-minded this afternoon…"

Adrienne greeted this the way a bull greets the flapping of the cape.

"How do you feel lately about taking Clay to see Kendra Madigan?"

Ah. The hypno-regressionist once more rears her controversial head. Clay's collective unconscious waiting like an oil well for Kendra Madigan's drill? She should have guessed.

"Haven't we had this conversation before?"

"I think we agreed to disagree, but then it was more or less academic, wasn't it? Because we expected to be staying in Denver until we went home."

Adrienne began shaking her head. "I don't see that going to Boston changes anything."

"It changes everything. Kendra Madigan's along the way."

"Like hell she is. She's *where*? South Carolina?"

"North." Sarah scowled mildly: *You knew that.* "It can be on the way if we want it to be. We *are* blessed with maps of this side of the country."

And it seemed absurd to be arguing about this once more. It was a battle of entrenchment rather than resolution. Not even a squabble worth having; it was boring. *Go ahead,* she might as well say, *if we're going to fight then why don't you up the ante so we at least have something worthy of a good argument.*

And then Sarah did precisely that.

"Adrienne," she said. "Please don't get angry —"

Oh?

"— but I've already been in touch with her. Before we left Denver. She thought she remembered me from the reception after her lecture at ASU."

Why, of course. Of course she would. This was Sarah; Sarah made an impression on people. The anger and resentment built from there: *How* could *you? How could you think of doing such a thing without consulting me first?* But of course that answered itself. The word *bitch* was employed; possibly *underhanded*. Such heat, such fuss, but in a perverse way it did feel divine, an excuse to vent steam that had nowhere else to go.

She was interested, was Kendra Madigan. According to Sarah, she wanted her crack at Helverson's syndrome as well. Didn't they all.

"Explain something to me," Adrienne said, "Now that you're finally getting decisive about something, why does it have to be *my patient*?"

"In about eight hours, Clay's not your patient anymore. So you can either be his friend, or you can be someone who wants to exploit him … or you can be someone who looks to be developing a very unhealthy obsession over keeping him to herself. So which is it going to be?"

None of the above, was that an option? Sarah was stabbing at her with the truth; unkind cuts, all. This is the way we fight — not with bludgeons, but with scalpels. Come midnight, Clay was a psychologically free man. This was something she would have to get used to, and promptly. Therapist no more, at best a consultant.

Before they'd left Denver, it had taken her two days to work up the nerve to tell Clay that her funding had been cut. It hadn't even taken him two minutes to accept it, passively, as if it were expected, unavoidable. For once she might have welcomed a minor tantrum. It would have at least united them against a common foe opposed to continuing whatever progress they had made.

"At the very least," Sarah said, softening, "whether we go there or not, don't you think the decision should be Clay's?"

Adrienne crossed her arms. "You know what he'll say."

"Uh huh," Sarah nodded. "So do you. That's why you're mad."

Tapping her foot — there was nothing else to argue with. "Well it *is* my car," she said, as petulantly as she could, and then there was nothing to do but laugh with the terrible gallows humor of surrender.

*

An old year waned, a new year took its place.

They greeted it quietly, privately. In motels, there were no holidays, there was only waiting. They watched the television and drank a few bottles as midnight came and went — ginger ale only, so Clay could share in the flow.

She was back on speaking terms with Sarah; the silence hadn't lasted long. It had seemed pointless to begin the new year on opposing sides of contention. If carried into the car tomorrow, mile after mile, it would feel intolerable.

She noticed that Clay spent time doodling on the notepad beside the phone, leaving the sheet behind when he retired to his room. She inspected

it, found a simple drawing of a bottle blowing a cork through a blizzard of confetti, with the mutant phrase, *Wring out the old, wring in the new.*

And he was gone, in a sense, a part of him. Symbolic though that midnight deadline may have been, the pendulum slice of the clock had severed … something.

With midnight's chime she had been discharged, as surely as a soldier returning from foreign lands. A soldier come home to hear someone tell him, *You're a civilian once more. Maybe you committed some questionable acts in the name of duty, but we'll not speak of that again. Your responsibility is over. Oh, and one more thing…*

Try to blend in, would you?

Thirty-One

They rode into the new year, taking turns driving.

The drone of the car became lulling, Sarah's mortal enemy; she hated to risk a nap. It felt crucial to be awake and alert, lest something slide past the window during her slumber, something she might never have occasion to see again.

Civilization seemed to grow denser the farther east they traveled, more and more land sacrificed to bland gods forged from steel and asphalt and reflecting glass. They rolled through the clotted express lanes of cities whose buildings stood like vast tombs, glowing from dead light within, and hermetically sealed against the cold and snow and rain, against voices that dared raise doubts, sealed against thought itself. These hives bred conformists by the millions.

But much of the countryside was hardly more reassuring, its fields lying fallow, stark as skeletons bleached by time. These, the graves of rusting, sharp-boned hulks that used to be tractors and combines, bogged down in mud or mired in financial tar pits.

And Chapel Hill, North Carolina, waited — for Clay, mostly, but Sarah couldn't deny her own curiosity. Clay's had been piqued as soon as she had suggested this detour. She'd had to be the one to do it. Adrienne had refused to actively involve herself in advancing such a scheme, going along only for the skeptical ride, as it were.

Clay had seemed to relish this new control over his destiny — at last, a choice. His mysterious mentor in Boston would keep for another few days, now that a newer obsession burned: the chance to incise deeper into his brain than any scalpel could reach. Perhaps they could peel back the layers and see what lay beneath, underlying his entire existence. He had spoken of such possibilities with fevered hope, while Sarah prayed the odyssey might prove worthwhile.

She feared that, come one place or another, Clay was hurtling toward some ultimate confrontation; if only he could be ready when it arrived.

They made it a two-day trip to Chapel Hill, and it was rife with stops along the way. Most anywhere served to shatter the monotony of the interstate. Sarah began to see the importance of seeking out whatever human oddities she could find during these brief sojourns, the people who stumbled to the cadence of their different drummers.

In convenience stores she browsed racks of postcards, in Tennessee buying a dozen of the ugliest she could find to send to their friends back home. Clay helped her choose while Adrienne pumped unleaded, and as Sarah paid for the cards he pointed at the nametag worn by the plump checkout clerk. *Kathleen — August Employee of the Month*, it read.

"Quit living in the past," he told her, and she began to cry. Fifteen miles down the road Sarah wondered if the girl would quit her job instead. It might do the trick.

She laid out the postcards the next morning over breakfast, writing one long sequential letter that flowed over all twelve. On each she gave instructions as to who was receiving the next card.

"What are you *doing*?" Adrienne asked, on her third cup of coffee and only now coming alive.

"I'm manipulating our friends from across the country," she said. "They'll have to get together for a party and everyone brings a postcard just to make sense of anything. It'll be in our honor and we won't even be there. I'll let you know when it's time for you to sign the last card."

Through the steaming scents of pancakes and bacon and eggs she noticed Clay's unwavering gaze, locked from across the table upon the postcards. "You can sign it too," Sarah told him.

"What's it like," he said quietly, "having a dozen people to write to? When I first left Minneapolis, I tried sending a few letters to people from high school, but no one answered."

Perhaps it was too early in the morning, her every essence exposed and unprotected, but the question bit, and bit hard. It came perilously close to drawing tears, for as she saw him stare at the postcards, ugly things though they were, she realized that he would view them as something far more. Seeing them as people he would never meet, never know, lives he could never touch even if he had the skills.

"It's like … being part of a tribe," Sarah said. Having noticed that Adrienne had paused with bitten lip, her coffee cup halfway between table

and tongue.

He looked across the diner, at the menagerie of travelers and locals, nothing in common but the morning and four greasy walls. "The modern tribal character, I don't think it's defined by its members. You know who really defines it?"

"Who?"

"Its outcasts," he said, then got up, and said he would wait in the car, that to wait in the cold would do him good, and she understood.

One could shiver only if one was alive.

*

Sarah continued to dwell upon tribes along the road, as they crossed into North Carolina. Clay had given driving a whirl this morning, giving it up when a headache sent him to the backseat. He moaned and wondered aloud if the bones of the skull did not at times loosen just enough to crash into one another for the sake of the pain it would cause, plate tectonics between parietal and occipital, temporal and sphenoid.

"*I* need a tribe, a primitive tribe, where everything is so elemental," he said, rising up to gaze out the window. "Science failed me, pretty much, I think. Psychology's just held its own — no offense. Maybe what I really need is a shaman."

Adrienne looked at Sarah from behind the wheel, and it seemed friendly enough. They had been peaceable but had kept their hands to themselves for the past couple of days, and the primary thing she'd felt for Adrienne — though the last she would admit to her face — was pity. Every mile driven, to Chapel Hill and to Boston, was just another step toward the altar of her obsolescence in the mystery of Helverson's syndrome.

"Isn't this more your field?" Adrienne spoke with an air of deference. If there was resentment she hid it well. "Tell us a story."

Sarah blanked for a moment, all the tales she had absorbed over her lifetime dissipating into dust, forgotten like cultures buried by aeons. Then she found one, a new tale, perhaps the one to bridge all the gaps inside this car.

"Once upon a time, not very long ago at all," Sarah said, and they grew as still as children, "there was a budding — and some would say exasperating — anthropologist. She'd just traveled from the desert land of her birth to the land of the mountain people, so she could be with someone

she loved very much, who in turn was off trying to help a mountain man she cared a lot about. It wasn't long before the anthropologist and her lover got into a teensy argument, and the lover said something about the anthropologist finding a lost tribe in the mountains. And the anthropologist said all the lost tribes were gone, just about, that the next time one was found, that'd probably be it, there wouldn't be any more.

"Now, although she didn't much let on, the thought of that made her more sad than she even would have expected, because she knew just who she was thinking about, a tribe she'd only heard rumors about, so she decided she never wanted them to be found, because the *possibility* of them being out there was a lot more important than the confirmation. The living mystery was more important than having it solved. And because if they were found, they wouldn't get to remain who they were anymore, it just never seems to happen that way. People who're found when they don't know they're lost seem to lose an awful lot in the finding. So maybe it'd be better for them, and for us, if they stayed lost."

Sarah paused to sip at a bottle of grapefruit juice. She was the only one moving, the other two poised and tuned in, waiting. She felt embarrassingly in control; she really had them.

"The people the anthropologist was thinking about, they were mountain people too, but way at the frontiers at the edge of the world, almost, in the mountains of the Gobi desert in Mongolia. Mountains and deserts … it wasn't until she was talking with her lover that the anthropologist came to truly appreciate the allure and the power of both places, because lies have a harder time living in them. So it seemed to her that this last lost tribe must have the best of both worlds where they were.

"The local Mongols called these people *almas*, and knew enough about them to describe them, and said they were short and stocky, and hairy, with broad features. Very crude clothes, made of animal skins, mostly. But not even the Mongols who'd lived around there nearly forever could talk with them, because their words were so different, and the *almas* were very shy people, too. But the Mongols did find the *almas* would trade with them, so they'd leave a parcel of skins or something on the ground, in the open, or on a big rock, where the *almas* could find it, and when they'd come back later it'd be gone, with something else in its place. Some other skins or tools or food that had been gathered … obviously things that the *almas* thought

had enough value to represent them to the people they were too shy to meet, and whose words they could never understand."

Sarah took another drink of her juice, and teased her tiny audience with more silence.

"So word got out, even from a region as remote as the Gobi Desert, and everyone who made it a point to pay attention to such things wondered who and what the *almas* really were. Obviously they were there, and not imaginary. The Mongols didn't have any reason to be making anything up. Finally, what a lot of people decided the *almas* might be was a surviving tribe of Neanderthals … still alive in one of the wildest places on earth, where there wasn't even a rain forest to draw in outsiders just so it could be cut down. The kind of place that was valuable only to the people who lived there … even the ones supposed to have been gone for forty thousand years. So it made the anthropologist wonder something: Do the *almas* still know something the rest of us have forgotten?"

She heard Adrienne give a satisfied, throaty chuckle.

"And that's where the story ends, I guess," she said, with a soft and hopeful smile toward the highway, toward the east, toward the other side of the world. "As far as the anthropologist knows, the *almas* are still there, still trading with their neighbors, and no one can say for sure who they are. Which is the way it should stay. So the story ends with the mystery and the wonder intact … just the way all good tribal legends should end. Because shamans know that's the part of the story that teaches the lesson."

She listened to the hum of the highway beneath them, shut her eyes, and felt Adrienne's hand sliding tender across the seat to rub her knee. Listened until she heard Clay stir in the back, and speak up for more.

"And what's the lesson of this one, do you think?" he asked.

"That the *almas* found a place in the world where they could still live in peace, even if it was the only place on earth left for them. So the *almas* aren't really lost at all, not to anybody who bothers to understand. And if they can survive, in a time that's completely wrong for them … maybe so can a few others who feel as lost as the *almas* must appear to the rest of the world."

She smiled back at Clay, who briefly met her eyes before looking away. She waited for more questions but none came, and she thought, for a change, that this was probably for the best.

*

They reached Chapel Hill in mid-afternoon and found a motel. Toward dusk, Sarah phoned Kendra Madigan to let her know they were in town, and ask when she would prefer they come to her home.

"Let's make it no later than ten-thirty tomorrow morning, all right? We'll have a long, long day ahead of us. And you'll promise me something? That each of you, you'll get a good long night's sleep tonight?"

"Promise," Sarah said.

"Let me ask you something about this subject of yours," and Ms. Madigan's voice had dimmed, quieted. "Is he prone to violence when he learns things he might consider unpleasant?"

Sarah's hand wrapped harder around the phone. "If it's about himself … he'd more than likely turn his distress inward. What are you expecting?"

"I don't expect anything specific, Ms. McGuire. We'll just have to wait and see. And be ready. Because when someone's under a hypnosis this deep…? It really is impossible to expect what might come bubbling up from so far down."

Thirty-Two

Maximum efficiency depended on isolation; of this Valentine was convinced. The greatest movers among humanity — the Alexanders, the Saladins, the Stalins — might be the ones who commanded armies, but even they would remain forever vulnerable. The machinery of their power could grind to a halt by the designs of a single, well-placed individual. The mind, the will, that toiled in perfect isolation could never be betrayed by another.

Only by itself.

And so Patrick Valentine wondered if he might not soon find himself slipping. Opening his house to another this way, he was bound to feel the impact, his focus diluted. Come tomorrow, Daniel Ironwood would be here a week. The impact did not go unnoticed.

Even now, his bedroom was no refuge. Daniel's voice, from the first floor: "Patrick! Get down here! *Right now!*"

Scowling, he rose. He tossed aside the inventory lists he'd been scanning, supplied by Teddy this afternoon, a grocery list of the ordnance in a Maryland armory that soon would donate to the cause.

Downstairs he found Daniel on the floor, wound tight and coiled before the TV, an arm extended, bird-dog still. The face on the screen they knew well; they woke up with it every morning, and still he could never quite surmount that initial vertigo when seeing it worn by someone else.

Valentine watched, listened. The story was half-over, but the rest was not difficult to fill in. News from Texas: Lawyers for Mark Alan Nance had exhausted their final appeal, and no one was cutting him any slack for the Helverson's defense. Execution was on for the middle of next week. In the grimmest room in Huntsville, a table waited with straps and tubes, needles and plungers.

Valentine could picture that table as clearly as if it were waiting for him, too. Perhaps it someday would.

"They're really going to stick him this time. Aren't they?" Daniel spoke with rare reverence. Behind his thick amber lenses his eyes may have

been awestruck.

"Turn that thing off." Valentine heard the pause before the click, Daniel assessing bullshit tolerance and deciding tonight there was none. He collapsed into his favored chair, frowned at Daniel; the remote control still dangled from the kid's hand. "Don't you ever read a newspaper?"

"What can I say?" Daniel shrugged. Those damned glasses; too hard to tell where his eyes were most of the time. "I like sound bites. It makes the news go down like a protein shake."

"Probably want your food prechewed before you get it, too."

"No, I lied," he said, backtracking. "I hate getting my hands all inky. Women like clean hands. Speaking of … when the hell am I going to get laid, here, Patrick?"

"In a few nights. The middle of this week."

"Why not tonight?"

"Because I say so."

It was a parent's answer, a peculiar thing to hear slipping from his own lips. But coupled with glowering eyes it was sufficient. There came no more argument.

He could have explained himself further but decided against it. The truth? It wasn't the proper time to start letting him pass his nights in the penthouse with Ellie. Everything was cold, hard function here — Valentine never lost sight of this, even if he spared his protégés the worst of it — and letting Daniel sleep in her bed would have served none. Yet.

Timing was everything. The world was a vast machine, and if one looked beneath the veneer of chaos that it wore as a disguise, one could see how so many components were geared to their own clockwork mechanisms.

Ellie Pratt, a single cog, kept track of her monthly cycles at his insistence. If she was accurate, she would be fertile again beginning the middle of this week. An ovum would once more slide down its fallopian conduit, and that egg was his, bought and paid for. If he chose to reserve it for the sperm of another, that was his right.

Only then would he allow Daniel Ironwood to lie with her, like a father giving his blessing to an incestuous union between two offspring separated at birth, whose hormones overruled social taboo. Only when she lay ripe would he turn Daniel free of his leash, and only then could nature

take its course. The moment had to be optimal, equal halves lust and fertility.

This could have been the problem with Timothy Van der Leun — Valentine had miscalculated timing. Brought him in, let the two of them get acquainted, allowed Van der Leun free access from almost the moment his flight had touched down. They had first gone to bed days before her window of ovulation, which Valentine recognized as his own libertarian mistake. Familiarity breeds contempt, or in this case, impotence. Timothy Van der Leun had been useless.

Fortunately, he had also been replaceable.

They *were* interchangeable, for Valentine's purposes. And even Timothy hadn't been his first choice. That honor had befallen the one in Los Angeles, a twenty-four-year-old scavenger and sometimes grifter named Bryce. Valentine had already been in contact with Bryce for two years, had supplied him with more information on his anomaly than he ever would have received from orthodox science.

"I've got a job for you," Valentine had told him over the phone one night. He'd been blunter with his metaphorical offspring at the time, believing they might naturally defer to him because of his age, his experience, his success at survival. "I want you to impregnate a very special young woman."

While there was no indication yet that the Helverson's males had inherited their mutation from a parent, it wasn't known what characteristics they might pass along to their own children. Only Mark Alan Nance had conclusively sired a child, but it had been the kid's death that had led to Nance's genetic testing in the first place. The family had later refused to allow an exhumation; leave the baby dead and buried.

Imagine the possibilities: a child conceived by not one but two Helverson's carriers. Would two such genetic dominants distill Helverson's into an even more potent manifestation? Valentine had a need to know, and it might take conventional science years to come up with an answer.

He had ordered, he'd threatened, and still Bryce had refused to cooperate. Valentine's fury had been great: *What, after all I've done for you?* But it had been a valuable learning experience. He could not expect them all to share his thirst for knowledge, nor count on indiscriminate sex drives

to ensure their cooperation, and above all he couldn't bully them. They had to be seduced, teased along.

So he'd written off Bryce, moved on to Timothy Van der Leun precisely because his will had seemed less formidable. Another abortive attempt, though he'd at least secured cooperation first.

He was working his way down the list, Valentine supposed, and it was looking as if number three might work out just fine.

As a physical specimen, Daniel Ironwood was splendid, trim and hard, and while he smoked much, he rarely coughed, even on rising in the morning. His perspective on whatever didn't directly concern him, however, seemed blithely indifferent. Last week it had taken him three days to ask the obvious question: Where had Ellie come from? How had Patrick Valentine managed to acquire a Helverson's female about whom the genetics databanks were unaware?

It had been a simple process, at least conceptually; far more time-consuming in the execution. More than two years ago he had tired of the slow pace with which Helverson's subjects were being uncovered. At that point the Cassandra Study was merely a proposal, though even if it had been implemented the next day it still wouldn't identify the subjects already out there. It found babies. He didn't want babies. He wanted adults, and thus far the adults were being found by accident, and all of them could be counted on a pair of six-fingered hands. So Valentine took matters into his own.

On the hypothesis that those who had yet to be found would be as socially maladaptive as those who had, and prone to scuttling along subterranean currents of society, he decided to advertise in the classifieds. He composed *Researcher seeks*-type ads that went on to describe the general psychological profile that had been emerging. Please send letter of introduction, date and place of birth, and photo. Qualified applicants would be paid for their time. He blanketed the country with them, in the personals columns of every major daily and underground paper, liberal weekly, and psychotic fish-wrap he could find. It was not cheap, but it was effective.

He had rented a central post-office box, and replies came by the thousands. The letters he ignored, which sped up the process immeasurably; the pictures were all he was interested in. The pictures told the true story, even if the tale was rarely heard.

Three. He turned up three…

One of whom he tried to contact and was never able to reach. The other two he courted slowly, eventually verifying them as genuine Helverson's subjects through Stanley Wyzkall at MacNealy Biotech. Of those, however, another turned rabbit after being informed of the diagnosis, and wanted nothing further to do with him. Only Ellie Pratt, formerly of an Atlanta suburb, hung in with him for the duration, although she more than compensated for the loss of the other two.

She was, after all, a rarity.

She was just that: a *she*.

In Ellie's picture had been the first page of the story: an unmistakable resemblance. Valentine had long since gotten used to the idea that Helverson's traits transcended ethnic boundaries, but it was dizzying to see them borne by a young woman. Softened by femininity somewhat, but there they were: the same streamlined contours of her bone structure, and eyes wolflike in their bright awareness. Her razored violet hair made her features all the more striking, angular.

In contrast to the males, Ellie had never exhibited much of a pattern of overt violence, although if she was ever truly angered, Valentine didn't think it would be wise to turn an unguarded back on her. Where the males lacked impulse control, she did not, reserving her anger for maximum impact, and forgetting nothing, ever. The first time Teddy met her, he'd chuckled heartily at her choice of hair dye. She waited four months, until overhearing him consider plugs to combat his own receding hairline, then sliced out two quick handfuls of what he had left. She then held the tip of the knife to Teddy's eye until he apologized for an insult he didn't even remember making.

Valentine supposed there would be ample Helverson's females to monitor, in time, once the dozens of infant girls found in the past two years had grown older. For now, though, there was but one identified Helverson's woman. *And I found her.*

Valentine had neither the training nor inclination to understand the intricacies of the genetic dance, but it had never seemed reasonable to him that Helverson's would exclusively target males. Wyzkall had, years ago, speculated that the trisome of number twelve might be interactive in some

way, yet to be spotted, with the male Y-chromosome. Valentine accepted this on purely hypothetical terms, never believing it to be the actuality.

He could not have been more pleased to prove Wyzkall wrong.

Nor could he have been more pleased to find Ellie Pratt amenable to the proposal of motherhood-for-hire that spirited her from her dead-end life in Georgia.

Valentine found the irony irresistible: Money he made from the sale of mass destruction was now being funneled toward the propagation of the species — more to the point, the newest variant of the species.

Truly, science made for strange bedfellows.

"Listen, Patrick?" said Daniel. "I want to get something cleared up."

Valentine looked at him with expectation. He nodded once, yielding the floor.

"If I do get her pregnant" — all stone-cold business behind dark lenses — "I want a guarantee that I don't have any obligations to the kid. None. Okay?"

"I already told you, you never even have to hear about it if you don't want to."

"Not good enough." Daniel smiled from across the living room, a thin and simmering smile. "I want something more binding than your word. This goes wrong somehow, bam, and I get hit with a paternity suit, I'm fucked, I've got no way out of that. They'll prove it with one test and there I am stuck owing child support."

He did have a point. Were their positions reversed, Valentine liked to think he would have enough presence of mind to cover his backside for just this possibility. This was good thinking.

"So you want a contract freeing you from all obligations and responsibilities, then."

Daniel nodded. "Absolutely."

"I know a lawyer I can call tomorrow. We should be able to get it taken care of quickly, just have him change the gender bias in a standard surrogate-motherhood contract."

"Good. Good. I'm just the cum donor." Daniel stretched one leg out upon the floor, hung an elbow off the other propped knee, and seemed to regard him with fresh curiosity. "I'm wondering one thing, though. Why aren't *you*? Save you a lot of trouble with me."

Valentine sat frozen in his chair, even the mere mention of the subject enough to bring on a dull, hollow pounding in his groin, like the beat of an empty heart. He'd thought he might avoid this with Daniel, thought him incurious enough to never bring it up.

"I would if I could," was all he said.

Daniel grinned, pointed down below. "Shooting blanks, huh?"

He should have been angry, furious even, should have clouted Daniel across the jaw for making a mockery of what malignancy had stolen. But fury was far away, and he supposed he had the TV to thank for that — seeing the face of the one condemned to death, without having had a chance to meet him. The lost sheep. And contemplating, too, what might have become of the newest lamb, who had promised nearly a week ago to find his way here.

As Daniel sat on the floor, tiring of no response to his prod, Valentine stared at him and had to wonder if this was how fathers felt, real fathers, who looked into the faces of their sons and saw not only themselves, but that one final chance to vicariously achieve those precious goals that had exceeded their grasp. Fathers could be sad that way, and stoic.

He supposed it had always been that way.

He supposed that, whatever else changed in the world, it always would.

Thirty-Three

Adrienne was proud of herself. Up before nine, a shower and a hurried breakfast in the room, twenty minutes on the road to Kendra Madigan's home, and not a single derisive comment the whole time. She was either growing up or becoming inured to this odyssey of Clay's. Certainly her stake in it had dwindled with each day and passing mile, until there were moments when she felt like little more than a concerned bystander.

"It's after ten," she said along the way. "What do you want to bet there's a supervisor or two in Tempe who'll be wondering where I am before the day's out?"

"It's Monday morning," Sarah chimed. "Do you know where your job is?"

Kendra Madigan lived in a quiet neighborhood with a great many trees. The homes were modern but tried not to be. A screened porch here, a row of columns there, a backyard gazebo visible up the block … small touches of an elder South that appeared stapled onto the new, rather than serving as parts of a genuine whole.

She answered her own door, which briefly took Adrienne by surprise. Subconsciously awed, perhaps, that the woman had thrice published controversial — and best-selling — books on the shadowy layers of the human mind. Didn't people of her ilk employ assistants to dispose of such trivialities as doorbells? Kendra Madigan didn't, and that made her somehow more real, more — dare she entertain the thought? — potentially likable. But even charlatans had their charms, did they not?

She looked much as Adrienne recalled from her appearance in Tempe, if sporting a touch more gray in her closely trimmed hair. At the moment she wore light yellow sweat-clothes that fit her impeccably. Her skin was richly black and she was in her late forties, given to posture and a gait that Adrienne persisted in seeing as statuesque. She did not so much walk as glide, would not so much sit as levitate.

"I do remember your face now," she told Sarah while leading them in. "Those occasional letters you wrote? I never could quite put a definite face with them, but let me tell you, you're who I hoped you would be."

"Letters?" Adrienne said.

Sarah blushed, caught in the act. "I bought my own stamps."

Kendra Madigan turned to Clay, even before introductions were formally made. Very smooth, Adrienne observed. Drawing him in at the first possible opportunity.

"When I lectured at the ASU campus," she told Clay, "they gave a reception that afternoon. Boring things, horrible things, most everyone standing around engaged in intellectual pissing contests, but if they're meeting your fee you do feel an obligation. At this one, one of the grad students was … well, let's describe him as very vocal in his condemnation of me, on theoretical grounds."

"He was being an asshole," Sarah translated.

Kendra bestowed a luminous smile. "And you're the one who doused his flame by managing to spill two brimful glasses of champagne into his lap. I remember well, it was the highlight of the afternoon. I never complimented you as I should've, though. You *almost* made it appear accidental."

"Looks like I left too early that day," Adrienne said, and it felt as one of those rare bittersweet moments in which you glimpse a lover in a light all her own — Sarah, wholly apart from Adrienne, as if there might not have been an Adrienne, ever. Just Sarah alone, acting on impulse and later neglecting to recount the story. She wished she could have seen it, Sarah delivering comeuppance, sophomoric though it was. She should have been there.

Kendra led them through the house, charming, disarming, a weaver of spells. From a distant room a grandfather clock intoned a solemn half-hour stroke — ten-thirty. As they passed a broad, open stairway that led to the second floor, Adrienne grew curious to see her bedroom, her private bath; see the real mistress of the house. Was she a closet sloven?

A rec room ran along the back of the house, and here Kendra took their coats, hanging them in a closet. She sat for a moment to unfasten strangely hooked collars from around her ankles, then pointed to a metallic framework in one corner that Adrienne had assumed was used for chin-ups.

"I was doing my morning gravity inversion when you rang," she said. "Fifteen minutes per day. Wonderful for facial skin, they say, and I'll vouch for that. But now I hear it puts dangerous blood pressure on the eyes. They never cease finding the ghastly side effects, do they? Beautiful or blind, why does it have to be such a choice?"

Clay shrugged. "Either way, your back should hold out fine."

"Yes. *Yes*," she said, as if never having considered this. "In life there are few constants, but that must be one of them. You're absolutely right."

She maintained the small talk for several minutes, and to Adrienne it was apparent that she was attempting to set them all at ease, especially Clay. Had they slept soundly? Where were they staying? Some fierce weather they must have come through farther north. Obviously their situation deviated from the norm she would be used to, with no time to work leisurely around to a protracted session. Now and again, to Clay alone she would direct a question or two, fairly innocuous, subtle in its probing; gaining a feel for the way he answered, how he responded to her.

Adrienne focused primarily on Clay during such exchanges, her first occasion to watch him relating to another therapist. She began to wonder if she'd not been too hard on herself, too preoccupied with her failure to deliver grand miracles to see evidence of the smaller ones that had been wrought over their months of effort. For this was not the same Clay she had first encountered, who tested his therapist as an adversary. This was not the Clay who had suggested she compensate for his inability to masturbate.

This was a Clay Palmer who was open to trust.

And if he could trust, he had hope.

Kendra requested they follow her down a hall to her office, and what a far cry it was from those Adrienne was used to. Sarah had grown wide-eyed and loose-necked, shuffling a slow pirouette, staring with a naked and grasping wonder at the masks that lined the walls. Here were faces of ritual that, Kendra told them, predated all texts, all histories, faces dipped from wellsprings of myth. Masks from the Old World and the New, from both hemispheres; from Mexican village to Borneo rain forest, from Inuit ice field to African bush. Faces for death and for life, faces for healing, for the supplication of implacable nature, faces for the appeasement of gods whose names she would never hear. And while Adrienne rationally knew that behind those empty eye sockets lay nothing but walls, she still felt watched.

The eyes of the world were on them, and the eyes of time, as well.

"Let's sit down," Kendra said.

There were just enough chairs. Her attention now fell squarely on Clay. She asked if he had ever been hypnotized before. He had, a few years ago, by a psychologist in Minneapolis, and had gone under with ease. This was no surprise — highly intelligent people usually did.

She explained the underlying principles of what they would be doing throughout the day, the procedures used. Some of the background he'd already heard from Adrienne and Sarah — the notion of the collective unconscious, a deep pool of archetypal images and fundamental human knowledge, transcendent of culture and unfathomably ancient, that resided in the evolved mind the same as a history of function resided in other organs. A fellow Jungian, Kendra could not believe that the human psyche was blank at birth.

Clay listened without impatience, as if he had heard none of it before. Just a sharp crease of expectation across his contoured face, the face of someone poised on a windswept brink, awaiting signs and sigils that would mean something to him at last.

And if at times it sounded ludicrous, that the collective unconscious could be tapped by hypnosis, even conversed with, there was no doubt that Kendra Madigan passionately believed in what she was doing, to the extent that she was willing to risk arrest. She had no license to possess or dispense psychoactives.

It was this willingness to put her neck on the line that made Adrienne's reservations harder to voice. Still, she could not remain compliantly silent. Someone *should* play the devil's advocate, so Clay could make as fully informed a choice as possible.

"If you've already accessed the collective unconscious," Adrienne said, "and it's what it's theorized to be — an aggregate species knowledge — then what's the point of putting anyone else through the process? Aren't you going to get the same basic results every time?"

Kendra smiled as if enjoying the challenge — ah, a worthy opponent. "I did, at first, until I started to refine techniques. Regardless of the commonalities we carry around inside us, each of us is still an individual. We can relate to universals through an individual perspective. I've found that, by the time subjects can speak of what's being confronted, by the time

the information is routed through the verbal areas of the brain, they're usually imprinting it with their own uniqueness. Their deepest self-knowledge that most are never even aware of."

"They can see their purpose in an overall scheme, then?" concluded Sarah.

Kendra nodded. "I believe many can, yes."

"And suppose a subject is in a fragile state of mind," said Adrienne, "and may not be equipped to handle the knowledge. Do you bear the responsibility for what happens to him?"

"Yes," she said, quite firm. "But just so we know where each of us stands … what kind of responsibility do you have in mind?"

"I know your methods. They can't be free of danger." Adrienne drew her composure and fingertips together in one calm movement. "If you harm him in any way … I'll have you up for review."

Kendra nodded once more, and Adrienne had to give her this: You could not ruffle this woman. "You'll do what you must."

Clay stirred in his chair. "Adrienne, how old am I?"

She started, not expecting this. "Twenty-five."

"An adult, right? Now let me get this straight: Back in Tempe, you told a group of researchers that I was sane, that I was competent to make my own decisions, and that you'd testify to it in court, if it came to that. Is that right?"

Her mouth was going dry. "Yes."

"Then butt out."

It was so brusque, Adrienne wasn't even sure she'd heard him correctly, until Kendra spoke up, an unlikely ally.

"Clay," she said sharply, sternly, eyes piqued with a hint of what must have been a fierce demeanor underlying her calm grace. "This woman is concerned enough about you to accompany you more than halfway across the country. If she and I have a professional disagreement, that's fine, I'm accustomed to them. But I would appreciate your respect for her concern. She's earned that."

Well, blow me down, Adrienne thought, fairly astounded. She watched Clay lower his gaze, chastised. He turned to her, a crease showing between his eyes.

"Sorry," he said softly. "But this is important to me. So trust me. I want to do this. I have to."

Adrienne nodded, resigned. It did not imply her blessings.

Kendra had him swallow a pair of tablets — psilocybin derived from *Psilocybe mexicana* mushrooms, she explained, one of nature's numerous keys to unlocking psychological doors. In general, her best results had come from using psilocybin, although some subjects seemed to react more favorably to mescaline.

She sent him to the bathroom to sheathe his penis in a Texas catheter. The tube coiled out of his jeans, down to a urine bag that he hung from a special hook on the chair. This would be no brief hypnosis, she cautioned, and subjects often voided their bladders — sometimes from simple prolonged need, other times from loss of sphincter control while plunging deep into more turbulent regions.

Blinds drawn, the room was dimmed until the masks seemed to float around them like ancient nobles peering through the dusk. Clay sat in his chair, a voyager breathing deeply to calm himself. Kendra set before him a small portable table, on which stood a pyramid of black plastic and metal, as tall as a hardback book tented spine-up. When she toggled a switch recessed into its back, a socket in front began to pulse with soft light. Adrienne could not see the bulb itself — probably a good thing — only the languid strobing across Clay's face, shadow/light/shadow/light, his impassive features in continual alternation.

"I want you to stare into the light, Clay, the center of the light." Kendra's voice was cultivated and practiced, as smooth as a perfect lullaby. "There's only the light … and the sound of my voice…"

For minutes she lulled him onward, the set of Clay's eyes — frequently so hard and wary — softening with glazed surrender. *Don't go,* Adrienne almost said, an inexplicable sorrow coursing through her, as if he were leaving the room, the country, the year, with a risk that he might never return whole.

Kendra gradually took him through his life in reverse, leapfrogging a year or two at a time. "Where are you now?" she would ask, and he would answer in small, soft syllables: at home … at school … looking at my baby sister who forgot how to breathe. Days of pain and sorrow, yet they rarely

disturbed the serenity of his countenance. He knew peace in this inner realm.

Adrienne felt an elbow nudging her side; Sarah nodded toward the door, the hallway, a question in her eyes. They stepped out as quietly as possible, pulling the door closed.

"I know you're here as a prisoner of circumstances," Sarah said, "but can you at least entertain a slightly open mind?"

"I don't know. I'm … I *am* trying." She tried to step away for a moment, gather her thoughts. "It's easy to be seduced by the novelty of it … but I don't know." She spun on her heel to plant herself before Sarah again. "Don't you think I *want* to believe in what she says she can achieve? I do. I *do*. But I'm concerned about what it could do to Clay. And a part of me still thinks no, this is too simplistic. The collective unconscious? There isn't even agreement that there *is* such a thing."

"But you believe it exists."

"Yes."

"And you believe it can emerge in dreams, right?"

Again she agreed, recalling what had, above all, convinced her. A case documented by Jung in *Man and His Symbols*, in which a fellow psychiatrist had brought him a booklet handwritten by the man's daughter, given to her father as a Christmas present. She was but ten, the vignettes she had written a series of a dozen dreams she'd had while eight years old. The dreams were filled with imagery and symbolism she could never have been aware of on any level but intuitive: dreams of death and regeneration, of beasts devouring creation, of dancing pagans storming heaven. She had dreamt the myths of the world.

A year after committing them to paper, she had died. In her dreams, so unlike those of a child, it was as if some hidden cleft of her mind had known what was imminent.

"Yes," said Adrienne. "I believe it does."

"Then it's there. For you, it's there." Sarah clasped both of Adrienne's hands between her own, rubbing. "And if it emerges in dreams, it's because it has a need to. And if that need is there, well … who's to say it might not flow toward another outlet if it's made available?"

"Maybe you're right. I want you to be right." She stepped forward, into the safer harbor of Sarah's waiting arms. *I want you to be right, I want*

it there, waiting for us on the other side of consciousness, saying, I was here all along — you just never asked me until now.

Perhaps she was not nearly so opposed to Kendra Madigan and her techniques as she was to the idea of turning Clay over to someone who could offer him something she could not. It could have been anyone and she would have found a reason. We healers, what a territorial breed we are. Like the missionaries of different faiths who vie for the privilege of being first to convert the savages.

"Let's go back in," Sarah said, then gave Adrienne's hands a kiss and, holding firm, led the way.

The regression continued, Kendra Madigan taking Clay back to a loose and liquid awareness of prenatal existence, for which he seemed to have few words, although body language spoke with its own eloquence. He folded into a fetal position while scooting deeper into the curve of the chair, gently rocking himself back and forth, as if cresting the buoyant waves of a warm ocean.

"Now I want you to go back even farther, Clay," Kendra said, "back before there ever was a Clay. You'll remember if you let yourself. But you can't go straight back, because there's only so far you can go in that direction … only so much Clay can remember on his own because there wasn't always a Clay. But you're part of something much older. So you have to find a new thread to follow. You still have to keep going back … but sideways this time. Do you understand what I mean by that?"

His head raised a fraction. "Yes…"

"That's glorious, Clay, that's wonderful. Now … I'm going to leave you for a while, but I'll be back. I'm going to leave you to find your own way. I want you to follow the paths that open up, and listen to the drums. Go where the drums lead. Deeper, and deeper … and deeper…"

Kendra pulled away and reached for a remote control. With a few pecks of her finger there came from hidden speakers a low and steady rhythm, hypnotic in its own right. It thumped like echoes off a canopy of green, woven with the brown of ancient boughs. Adrienne found herself drifting with it, a timeless resonance taking root in heart, in bones, in soul.

She watched as Clay slowly uncoiled from his fetal position, lowering both feet to the floor again, and his hands to his sides, rolling his head limply back until he appeared to stare into the ceiling, beyond the ceiling.

His jaw drooped, slack, then he came forward again, slumping while his head nodded toward his chest. It took several moments before she realized the rise and fall of his breathing was synchronizing itself to the drums.

Nearly ninety minutes had passed since Clay had first gone under. Kendra murmured parting reassurance to him, then shooed them from the room.

"He's responding," Adrienne said in the rec room, "he's responding to something in there, in that state. And even I could feel … something."

"Oh yes." Kendra settled luxuriantly into a nearby lounger, raised her feet. "Powerful stimuli, aren't they?" Suppressing a warm laugh at the expense of, Adrienne surmised, the intrigued skeptic.

"How long will you leave him alone?"

"I'll check on him from time to time, but I won't resume any real contact for two to three hours."

Sarah had found her way to the inversion bar, hanging upside down by bent knees. The tips of her long braids whisked at the mat beneath. "It's not really new, Adrienne, what she's doing in there, you know? It's pretty damn ancient."

Kendra nodded. "Simple shamanic techniques, mostly. And those go back thirty, forty thousand years, it's believed. The drumming, the use of natural hallucinogens? You'll find them in nearly every primitive society the world over. They all came up with the same methods, independently, and the reason they've been around so long is because they *work*, girl. My main contribution is to put a more modern slant on the way they're applied. I give someone a pill or two so he doesn't have to gobble a handful of mushrooms or peyote that might make him sick. Instead of a live drummer to maintain a trance beat, I have it on compact disc, set to repeat until I turn it off. The main reason I start the hypnosis before the psychoactives have a chance to take effect is that when they do, I want the subjects carrying in as little baggage from the outside world as possible. Then after someone's under? It's just a matter of investing enough time to pick around the way any trained shrink might." She spread her hands. "Who's ready for lunch?"

They ate, they talked, they spoke of how some of the most effective techniques for healing the body and plumbing the mind came from ancient traditions. Only recently had modern medicine begun to turn its head

around to the past, taking fresh looks at methodology long since dismissed as superstition and folklore, and recognizing their legitimacy.

Throughout, Kendra was never far from another trip into her office to check on Clay. He maintained a stable condition: sitting comfortably, with deep, even breathing. Later in the afternoon she decided it should be time to proceed, and again they gathered before him.

As it went on, Adrienne felt her hands grow cold even though the house was warm; felt herself prickle every time she considered that it was not really Clay's voice she was hearing. It was something else, speaking through his throat. Something that filled each of them and surrounded them every day of their lives, that predated them, and would survive them and everyone they would ever know and never meet.

He spoke with the voice of millennia.

Adrienne listened, clutching Sarah's hand and thinking, no, it just couldn't go this far, Clay could not be regressed to a level of cellular and genetic and evolutionary awareness, yet he was, *he was*, and she began to bite her lip, for that which he had sought all along might be coming loose, buried like an ancient vase that desert winds were scouring free. *Please ... let him be strong...*

And what a coward she was — she would never have had courage enough to look this in the face and ask the question that demanded an answer that would have to be lived with forever:

"What is it inside you, Clay, and the others like you, that makes you different from everyone else?"

*

He was Clay, and he was Not.

In oceans of salt and aeons, where the coils of serpents gave birth to worlds, he floated — cell and zygote, embryo and fetus, past and future. He was in the plankton that fed the fish that fed the bird that fed the wolf that fed the man that fed the soil. In the mud that silted along ancient rivers, in the dust that fell to earth from a billion skies beyond.

He was all.

He was nothing.

He was aware.

for i am not like others

not like others

not like others

Yet all things were but strands of the same woven thread.

Following, then, where timeless rhythms led, he stood upon a plain where grasses flowed like green seas, where distant acacia trees grew tall as knowledge … here on the savannah, where the earliest men and women learned to stand tall, to stride, to see beyond an old horizon.

It lived, this land. It breathed. It took no notice.

Yet into him it flowed, and he knew.

The beasts of the land were driven by compulsions bred into them by spans of time that saw the birth and life and death of stars: to expand their territories, to consume, to squeeze their progeny from gaping wet wombs, and this they did until they met their limits. For nature abhors imbalance even more than a vacuum.

The lion feeds upon the gazelle, for if it does not, the land cannot support the gazelles to come.

And he knew that it was systemic perfection this way, plants and predators and prey alike fueled by a singular sun. Then he witnessed the coming of that which did not belong, borne by the Age of Man and Machine, and he understood that an organism fueled by petroleum will crush any and all fueled by the sun, for what is petroleum but millions of years of sunshine stored?

Thus the balance becomes paradise lost.

Kill the lions, the gazelles are doomed to breed themselves to extinction. Prey need predators, it is the nature of the beast. For unchecked growth leads to far worse than tumors.

He watched, then, the death of the savannah, as grass burned into fields of gray ash, and the trees shed an exodus of leaves that left them blackened skeletons curling stark against a sky gone yellow-brown with haze. His skin sloughed in layers of molt and decay, flesh uncoiling to ribbons to strands of the double helix, where all things were written, the most ancient of texts, yet could not revisions be part of the plan?

For what are mutations but defense mechanisms to ensure survival by resistance.

Survival? And he — Clay, yet Not — wondered: *But whose?*

He saw it crawl over a horizon that burned with the imminence of gangrene and graves, where living twitched to the teeth of starving

scavengers, where forsaken prayers flowed, corrosive as bile steaming beneath a dying star.

It was immense, black as shadows and gossamer thin. It was a living night, far from the reach of the sun.

what's wrong with me? he screamed to whatever might listen. *for i am not like others*

not like others

not like others

biological override, he thought it told him, and he began to cry, for he thought he understood his part now, a role he never wanted to play in any god's creation, no matter what the name of the god, *when the worst impulses of a species become a written imperative*

And as the savannah shriveled to a blackened crisp around him, as he heard the death wails of distant cities, he began to piece together the simple logic that had eluded him long enough:

with no natural enemies, it is inevitable that we become our own

It would make a fine epitaph.

*

Clay was sobbing even before Kendra brought him back over the brink of consciousness, mid-evening by now, and Adrienne watched him cross the threshold from the inner worlds to the outer. Thinking, *Welcome back, and oh, poor Clay, what did you learn there at the end, and can you ever see things out here the same way again?*

One look into his newly opened eyes and she knew she need not ask to know the answer; only wondering, with her own heart feeling so suddenly sunk, how would his feel?

I've lost him. God damn her, I have lost him forever.

They began to converge upon him, reaching with hands gone tender with concern, but he would have none of it. Backing away, lurching out of his chair and dropping to one knee with muscles gone stiff from hours of disuse, Clay screamed at them not to touch him. He was dragging the half-full urinary bag behind him like a distended organ. He ripped the tube free and hurled the bag across the room, where it slammed into the wall with a splash of liquid. A gray ceramic mask with black-rimmed eyes and a grotesque stitched-over mouth was jarred loose from the impact, and fell to crack into fragments on the floor.

"Are you satisfied now?" Adrienne snapped at Kendra, the woman's eyes grave, but what an awful time for I-told-you-so's.

Clay pushed past them, dropped to the floor amid cold urine and broken shards to find the biggest piece, as if his violently trembling hand was made for it.

He managed to carve two jagged lacerations down his face, from temple to jaw, before they stopped him. It was much longer before they were able to stop the bleeding.

The tears might go on indefinitely.

*

Back at the motel she and Sarah got him settled in for the night, slipping him two tranquilizers from a bottle she had no legal right to, technically, but what hospital did not bend pharmaceutical law so long as privileges were not abused?

She considered taking one, too, but didn't, in case Clay would later need her alert. If she did not understand in full what he'd haltingly told her, told Sarah, it had been enough to convey agonizing generalities: what Clay was, or believed he was, or hallucinated himself to be — one of a vanguard of intraspecies self-destruction, spewed out by a world under the gun.

She and Sarah slept back-to-back, as if the reality of their own drawn faces was too much for one night. Sarah rose before her to a blood-sky dawn, drawing sustenance from air like ice, and went to check on their baleful companion of the road and vision quests. Through sleight of hand, Sarah had kept his key last night, just in case.

"He's gone," Sarah came back to report, quietly, with a grinding finality. Quick to laugh and quick to love, she had never been one to cry for no good reason. But when she found one, tears could come in a deluge.

Adrienne sat up, drawing the covers around her to the neck, as tight as a shroud, and shut her eyes when Sarah said it again, this time like an accusation aimed at herself.

"He's gone."

Thirty-Four

The world was the same one he had seen throughout this trip — throughout each of his wanderings — yet it was different in all the worst ways. Imbued with new significances now that he was able to see things as they really were.

Ignorance was bliss and he had never even realized. Too much fundamental knowledge cast all possibility for beauty and wonder to the furnace. His smiles, his laughter … these had been rare enough, as his life had gone, but he had dared hope that one day he might look back on these years as growing pains, and know that he had come through that fire to be a better man who could smile and laugh with ease, maybe even love, and know that these pleasures had been earned.

But now? He would never again know such simple graces; he knew himself instead. For anyone and anything, forevermore, he was ruined.

Hitchhiking north away from Chapel Hill, Clay did not sleep, in neither car nor truck cab, certainly not during the spells when transportation dried up for a mile or two, to leave him walking beside a highway, shrugged deeply into his field jacket like a displaced veteran, one small bag of belongings to call his own.

He spoke little with those who gave him rides, sharing the miles in silence and paranoia. Wondering if they regretted stopping for him once they got a look at the two narrow scabs raked down the side of his face, and went ahead with their offer out of fear of what vengeance he might inflict for their change of mind. He supposed he did look ghastly enough, close up.

From winter's mild remission in North Carolina he journeyed straight up into its frozen and cancerous heart, where the winds grew more savage with every state north, and the snows more cruel. Past Washington it was all snarled traffic and insanity, and he scanned the car wrecks for blood and mangled lives. He watched distant smokestacks vomit evil clouds into a sky already engorged, and grimy urban lowlands felt like the most fitting realms through which to pass, teeming with addictions and excrements and neon claustrophobia.

And from time to time he could not help but look out over these bleak valleys that not even snow could beautify, as even the snow smelled of chemotherapy, and think, *You made me what I am. So live with the consequences, whatever they are.*

Soon he amended: *You made* us *what we are.* He was not in this entirely alone.

He would gaze across ruined buildings collapsing of their own weight, on rusted bones of structures never completed — they seemed the fate of all vain tinkerings. He had to laugh in spite of himself, with signs of such grandiose rot all about him, that the final end might come about through something as minuscule as a chromosome. With a species in genetic decline, how long would it take? And why so protracted a fall, when they had built weapons enough to get it over with so much quicker? Something biblical, that would be nice, heaps of rubble that fumed with incessant, sulphurous clouds, where mangy dogs licked the sores of malignant old men. There's drama for you.

Near New York, he recalled the painting on Adrienne's office wall, *The White Veil*, its tranquil glimpse into the first few years of this century. If only he could see it again, just once more, he might not even scoff. Of this century, he was closer to its finale than Metcalf had been to its opening. Would that he had talent enough to do justice to what the century had brought to bear, the potentials it had squandered.

Graham would have understood.

If artists were the prophets of their times, no wonder so many had gone mad. And though he'd never been an artist, and never would, he still had his own excuse.

It just ran deeper than most.

*

Clay arrived in Boston late the next morning after leaving North Carolina, more than twenty-four hours and eight hundred miles on the road. He hit the asphalt of the unfamiliar city when a trucker hauling a load of sportswear stopped with a hydraulic hiss to let him out along the eastern, uptown edge. Here the streets radiated like crooked spokes from a central hub.

He headed inland a number of blocks and realized he was on a stretch that appeared to be part of some walking historical tour, demarked by a red

stripe on the sidewalk. Here and there a small, well-preserved building with its foundation in colonialism stood in anachronistic contrast to everything that had grown up around it.

He commandeered the next pay phone he saw and dialed the only number he had left to call. Though their sole conversation a week past had been brief, he remembered the voice that answered.

"It's Clay Palmer," he said. "I'm here."

Silence, long and reasoned. From the background came a muddle of voices and cheer and warm meals, as if Patrick Valentine were eating lunch in a pub and had answered by cell phone. Finally, "I was expecting you'd be making this call days ago."

"There were detours." He pressed a gloved palm over his ear to muffle the din of traffic. "I couldn't help that. What do I do next, you're not going to run me from phone booth to phone booth, are you?"

"Where are you, exactly?"

"Congress Street, near State."

"You're on the Freedom Trail?"

"Is that what this is called?" He found a nice mellow irony in that.

"Keep following it north, and I'll pick you up in front of the Paul Revere House, on North Street. I'll be coming down from Charlestown, so you should beat me there."

And that was it, nothing about how they would recognize each other at first sight. There was no need. Surely this was an advantage, one of few. They had their own visual shorthand. An implicit history would unfold the moment the eyes of any two met.

Clay pushed away from the phone, into the glut of uptown workers in midday flux. North, following the Trail.

Now, more so than at any time during the last eight hundred miles, he wondered why he had still come. It could no longer be to seek answers; he had all he needed, all he could bear and more. He had gone where no Helverson's subject ever had: so deep inside himself that he knew what an apocalyptic creature he really was, a living testament to chaos theory. What else was left but to live it out? He possessed more insight into their aggregate nature than Patrick Valentine could dream of.

Maybe he had come to set the man's thinking straight, if that was what it needed. Which sounded suspiciously altruistic; he must keep that a secret,

naturally.

Clay staked out the curb on North Street, before the colonial simplicity of the Revere House, now and again pacing or jittering in place to keep up his body warmth. Like a junkie waiting for his connection. He felt half-frozen when at last a car glided to the curb. Through a tinted window they appraised each other. Similar eyes set in the same sockets. More lines on Valentine's face and a bit less hair on his head, but Clay figured if he lived long enough, he too would have the lines, at the very least.

Valentine said nothing, nor did he gesture. Clay circled around to the passenger door, dropped his bag to the floorboard, and settled into the most comfortable seat he had been in for eight hundred miles. He supposed that fabled German craftsmanship was no idle myth. It wasted no time in whipping back into traffic.

"You look terrible," Valentine told him.

"That figures."

"Are you hungry?"

"I should be. I don't know. No." Perhaps he would be later, when the low-grade flow of adrenaline had pumped its way through his system, once Patrick Valentine and whatever he was had become just more facts of life, digested and assimilated. "Do you plan on telling me who you are, ever?"

"I don't guess there's any more reason not to."

"Well, don't bother if it's going to put a strain on you," pausing a beat, then: "Patrick."

Valentine scowled at him from behind the wheel, then his brow smoothed with a mirthful tic of his mouth. "How long have you known?"

"A few days is all. You're not the only one who can exploit information sources." He measured Valentine for annoyance but saw the man was holding calm; just a look in his eyes, *Go on, who was it?* "I went to see Timothy Van der Leun."

"Well, that's one for *you*. Resourceful." His traffic gaze seemed to darken; he might run over children or kittens if it was more convenient than swerving. "How *is* Tim?"

Clay shrugged. "Terminal," and that seemed to say it all, to the satisfaction of them both.

As the car carried them north, across the Charlestown Bridge, they spoke of recent pasts and contributions to society. *What do you do,* my last job I was a garbage man, *oh yeah? I sell guns to garbage so they can create more — see the symmetry there?* Clay felt the exhaustion of the past two days beginning to drag him down, as if he were wearing a suit of lead, yet still he burned inside with a cold arc. Here he was, at journey's end, at the side of the world's oldest unknown Helverson's subject. The father of them all? It felt that way, in a sense. Patrick Valentine had gone through life with nineteen years of seniority over him, and was neither dead nor imprisoned nor institutionalized, and that made him a creature of some awe.

Clay took discreet care to study him, the way every move seemed so deliberate, and the way his eyes soaked up his surroundings as if evaluating them for ever more opportunism. He was obviously a very hard man, who had risen from the wreckage of his worst impulses and mastered them, given them the deadly cutting focus of a laser.

Could it be he had actually beaten Helverson's? No, more impressive still: made it *work* for him? The mere thought of such a feat had seemed ludicrous before.

They arrived at Valentine's house — here again, another show of what had always seemed beyond him, anything more than three rooms on a top floor. He told Clay he had company at present, although this would be changing tonight, and this afternoon this company was out of the way with a business associate, so Clay need not worry about being disturbed.

He was ushered to a guest room, supplied with towels, shown the bathroom, where he showered away the film of road grime that greased his body. He wiped steam from the mirror and hoped to see something better than what he had taken into the shower, but it was not so. His eyes still drooped and his bones looked more prominent than ever, as if his skeleton were trying to burst free.

When dry, Clay trudged to the bed, the latest port in the latest storm. He sank into it, hoping he would not dream, that exhaustion would claim even those fissures of the brain they said never slept.

But dream he did, tossing through murky visions of a desolate factory whose boilers churned late into the night, as he walked through steam and corridors to emerge in an industrial cavern lit by a suffusing red glow. Gears whined and magnetos spun, and he stood on the edge of a concrete pit filled

not with solvent but with naked human bodies that writhed like worms in a can. How it beckoned, take a plunge into the gene pool, and as he stared into its fleshy depths every now and again something would churn up through the mass to differentiate itself — an arm here, a leg there, a face elsewhere, endless recombinations of each — until a threatened overflow was shunted off down a pipeline. He wondered where it would eventually empty out, and if they would all walk away from the spill or crawl like amphibians, and no telling what would be wrong with them by the time they splashed into the world, but then the world was always waiting for another new disease.

They would have their place in it after all.

*

He awoke after dark. Along mid-evening, Valentine told Clay there was somebody he wanted him to meet, so they ventured out in the car again. Valentine would explain himself no further, seeming to retreat into a cold, hard shell of purpose. Clay recalled the cryptic ramblings of Timothy Van der Leun: *You really don't know about that girl he's got up there? It would've been like humping my own sister.* He decided to play along, act surprised. Knowing Valentine's name was one thing. Knowing incomplete details about his peculiar fetishes or missions was something better kept quiet.

They picked up Beacon Street and he peered into the snowy wooded depths of the Common as they passed, wondering if it was anything like New York's Central Park: quaint by day, but after dark a hunting preserve for nocturnal predators and naïve nocturnal prey. Several blocks later they dropped down through the Back Bay, rolled along the downtown canyons.

The tower to which Valentine escorted him seemed to pierce clouds, yet was still made diminutive by the nearby Prudential Building. They took the elevator to the nineteenth floor and were admitted into an apartment by someone who seized the whole of his attention the instant he saw her.

Valentine made introductions but Clay heard them as if at a distance. Ellie, he said her name was. By now Clay had grown oddly accustomed to seeing his face on other males. Even that new one, Daniel, was no great surprise as he slouched in a lounger across the room, seeming to glare from behind inscrutably dark lenses.

But here was new overload … a new *gender*. The first of her kind? As far as he was concerned, she was. He need not pretend to be captivated. What a postmodern Eve she made, arms folded across her chest, wearing black tights and a shapeless gray sweater, appraising him with eyes that had never learned to turn away in coy aversion. Graham would have loved her, her smile with its near-mystic potential for cruelty. Nina would desperately want to be her friend, learn where she had her hair razored and dyed.

"Welcome to God's Little Cesspool," she said, and smartly arched her eyebrows at Valentine before returning to a cross-legged perch on the floor.

"She's beautiful, isn't she, Clay? In her way. Don't you think so?" asked Valentine.

Clay found it such an unlikely remark from the man he wasn't sure it hadn't been sarcastic. Although Valentine seemed more interested in how Daniel Ironwood reacted to it than in Clay's response. Jealous? Was he trying to make Daniel jealous?

Whatever the intention, it appeared to provoke some rise out of him.

"What the hell's he doing here tonight, Patrick?" Daniel slid forward in his chair, muting down the TV with a remote. "You too for that matter. You know what night this is."

Valentine squared himself, going to stone. "Just a friendly social call. You have a problem with that?"

But Daniel was not backing down. "What is it you're running up here, some kind of winter camp for chromo mutes? I was hoping for a little privacy tonight, or are you forgetting?"

"Oh you, you're so cute when you can't adapt to change," said Ellie, and she actually sounded lighthearted, an amused mediator. She looked up at Clay. "This is purgatory, is what this is. This is where we come after a life of unrequited sex."

"Then where do you go after here?" he asked.

"For me, a convent, I think that's all that's left. The rest of you, you're on your own." Ellie rocked back and forth on the floor with a bark of feral laughter. "I was *made* to wear a wimple and rosaries."

"That isn't what I was told," said Daniel. He had retreated a few inches into his chair, coiled and sullen.

"Oh, slutty insinuations now, is it?" She rubbed her temples with the slightest air of theatricality. "Strangest thing, I'm starting to feel a headache

coming on, it could last all night. I might have to ask you all to leave." She leveled a glance at Daniel, just shy of ferocious. "Alphabetical order by last name."

Valentine stepped forward to smooth them out, telling them to knock it off, while Clay was struck by the immense rarity of this summit. Four of them, Helverson's progeny all, two on the books and the other two off. Had this many ever been in one place at one time? Bickering already, though, and whereas he had been overcome by a disgusted pity for Timothy Van der Leun, for Daniel Ironwood he wasted no time fomenting a razored dislike. Entirely reactionary, of course — *Don't want me here? Fine, asshole, I'm not crazy about your company either.*

Four of them. How many would it take in a room before they hit critical mass and began the bloody scramble for territory and dominion?

As Valentine gesticulated to the seated Daniel, Clay sank onto the couch, leaned forward to run a finger through the dust on the heavy black and gray marble-top table. Did he know any symbols for disillusion that he could draw? No. Pity. It would have felt proper, commemorating the moment when he realized that even among his own genetic kind he really did not belong, not in any familial sense. There was no feeling of unity, nor even gallows humor — *Hey, sorry about your DNA, I'd donate you mine if I thought it would help* — but rather a pervading sense of a struggle for leverage. Double their numbers in here and they might well begin killing each other.

Valentine left the other two, came over to bid him step onto the smallish balcony. Clay frowned but followed; the man would not have brought him all this way to throw him nineteen floors to the street. The sliding glass door slammed behind him and the warmth of the apartment was forsaken. The winds up here were frigid but bracing, oddly welcome, cleaner than at ground level. The sound of traffic became a long-distance echo.

"They'll work it out," Valentine said. He went to the very edge of the balcony, fearless despite the snow and ice underfoot, and leaned against the railing. In his long topcoat and contoured skull he looked ready to fly. "Arguments are important. A sign of passion. All the bodily systems are primed then."

Clay turned to the glass, the curtain open on the other side. Beyond, Ellie and Daniel squabbled, silently to Clay … but, if body language was any indication, with waning vehemence. He had no doubt that if pressed, she would hold her own with ease. Wondering, too, what it would be like to be with a woman so akin to himself they could be joined halves of the same damaged egg, a broken yin to a shattered yang. Such a genetically incestuous union could be glorious, or terrifying. Maybe they would immolate themselves in the flames of taboo and leave nothing but smoldering ash.

"Somehow I can't believe your only purpose here is to run a matchmaking service for us," Clay said. "There has to be more on your mind than that."

Valentine faced him, now leaning back against the railing. What trust, or what confidence in his own authority; one shove and he could plunge to an icy death. "I have the world on my mind. And our place in it. I've lived years you never have. That makes me a valuable resource to you. It makes you a legacy to me."

"Why do you even care? I wouldn't."

"Because I'm the one that job falls to." Valentine pulled his hands from his pockets, scooped snow from the railing and began to pack it into a tight ball. "Have you ever killed anyone?"

"No. But there were doctors who said it was just a matter of time."

Valentine kneaded the snowball, smoother and rounder, veins popping out all across his muscular hands. "Sometimes you'll hear people say the first kill is always the hardest, and after that it gets easier. But they're ignorant on the subject. You can discount everything they say. It's the second that's the hardest. Because you've done it once, and this time you know what to expect and you know how messy it can be. How long it can take some people to die. That's when you have to look inside yourself and ask if you have what it takes to do it all over again. Nothing can be very hard when you're ignorant … only when you're fully informed."

He lifted the snowball, a perfect sphere of dense white ice. "From this height, the right angle? It just might kill." He lobbed it over the railing toward the sidewalk below. "That's the beauty of random chance. All you have to do is be willing to take the gamble."

Clay strolled to the edge, peered over and down. He saw the occasional pedestrian trudging through this winter's night, but no signs of calamity, of death from above. "You lost this one."

"And somebody won and never knew it. And all's right with the world. I could drop another tomorrow during rush hour and win, and all would still be right with the world." Valentine dusted his hands of melting snow and pocketed them. "I hope you understand that, Clay. Of the rest of *them* down there, not one in a hundred thousand would understand. But I think *we* should appreciate that element of life, because even though we may be new beings, I think what they consider wrong with us has instead unlocked something that's been buried for a very long time. The propensity for assuming a natural mastery — because we're not weighed down by the same petty little sentiments."

Clay began to pack his own snowball. "The noble savage?"

"Even better: a corrupted savage with cunning sharpened by reason instead of five acute senses. Nietzsche would've understood. He wrote, 'What a time experiences as evil is usually an untimely echo of what was formerly experienced as good — the atavism of a more ancient ideal.'"

Clay nodded but said nothing, packing his snowball in silence because there was no point to continuing. Patrick Valentine made an unlikely optimist — imagine that — actually seeing a future in Helverson's syndrome. He could share with the man what he had seen in himself, out on the burnt savannahs of human existence, even though Valentine would almost certainly refuse to believe.

"Human beings eat the world, bit by bit, but most of all we just eat one another," Clay said, and held up his little globe of snow. "All we are is a new model designed to take bigger bites and get it over with." He crunched his teeth into the snowball, as he would an apple, then crumbled the remainder in his fist and sprinkled it over the side.

Valentine watched the object lesson with eyes gone grave, an inquisitor listening to the errors in a heretic's logic.

"You need to kill," he said. "Blood awakens. Blood changes everything."

Thirty-Five

Adrienne was at a loss as to how to proceed, but maybe this was only because she had sacrificed so much sleep the past two days. Perish the thought it was because she had extended herself so far beyond responsibility and reason that any decision seemed destined to be the wrong one.

"Let's examine the facts," Sarah said. How patient she had been throughout this odyssey, how splendid a lover, friend, voice of calm. "It doesn't look like there's a car over there, nothing's moving, the afternoon's getting darker and no lights are coming on. These are the unmistakable signs of an empty house."

"Maybe I should just go see and get it over with."

"Not alone, you're not. You don't have any idea what this man might be capable of, and I've got a feeling he's *not* someone you should be alone with. Not even for two minutes, Adrienne. Especially if he's the kind of guy who sits around in the dark."

Poised behind the wheel — it felt as if she'd grown here — she might have smiled had she had the energy to spare. Sarah's concern was touching. Moreover, it was unsettling. Little in the world caused Sarah to really worry, to admit that it was beyond her skills and smarts, her charmed existence altogether.

Idling at curbside in the quiet Charlestown neighborhood, a few homes down from the house of Patrick Valentine, the car heater blowing precious warmth, she tallied what little she did know and decided Sarah's concern was far from unwarranted.

Valentine obviously knew how to circumvent channels. Older by around a decade than the oldest confirmed Helverson's subject, he had gotten himself diagnosed without betraying his anonymity. He exercised what appeared to be unlimited access to medical and research records, and on his own had managed to uncover an adult Helverson's female and shield her from identification as well. By use of the mail, he toyed with the psyches of volatile people, exhibiting the aloof disregard of a sociopath.

These were obvious. Then there were the unconfirmable rumors: the guns, the missiles, and most repugnant, his planned foray into eugenics. God help any child conceived under his procurement.

And Clay, you knew at least some of this, you had to know to want to get this far in the first place, you knew and you lied to me about it.

Two days ago, after awakening to the news of his vanishing, she and Sarah had sat in their motel room and, over coffee, tried to choose a next move that would be best for everyone. They could, of course, return to Denver, then Tempe, resuming their lives and never knowing what had become of Clay. But neither had any doubt that he would continue on to Boston. The only issue was whether or not they should follow.

He had left no note, no reason for his abandoning them, and while it hurt, she had to remind herself he would have meant no malice by it. Likely he had been driven by pain, by shame, she and Sarah continual reminders of what he'd faced in himself at Kendra Madigan's. If they continued together, Adrienne surmised, he would look at them and fear they now saw him as something truly lost, whose irredeemable nature was a genetic mandate, with no more hope of a cure than a malignancy whose tendrils were braided through the brainstem.

On his own, at least no one need suspect that but himself.

They would follow, they decided. They would follow and at least let him know that their opinion of him had not changed, not on the basis of a psilocybin vision that may or may not have been valid. That Clay understand she would never, *could* never, give up on him was crucial, and if it was her final gift, then let him at least be the one to tell her so. She demanded little for herself when it came to patients — and Clay had become so much more — but he owed her this much.

But they could not follow without at least some idea of his destination, and her only key was Timothy Van der Leun. His phone number was unlisted with Indiana Bell information, but her notebook computer still had access to the mainframe at Arizona Associated Labs, and she found it on file there. Timothy’s voice, once he consented to answer his phone early that afternoon, had come from the bottom of a dead soul's gorge.

"I need your help. You're the only one who can help me," she had explained. "I brought Clay Palmer to Indianapolis and now I need to find him again because *he* needs help…"

"Who?" He'd sounded confused, feverish, so she had to tell him again, Clay Palmer, the one who came to see you last Friday, New Year's Eve. "Oh. Him. Right," Timothy had said. "I remember now." Then, in a thickened voice that nearly caused her to shudder, "Good scars. He had good scars."

She had pleaded and prodded and cajoled, on the theory that having been diagnosed years before Clay, Timothy might already have been contacted by the mysterious mentor in Boston. So long as she could keep him focused, he'd had ample tales to tell, information to share. In his more lucid moments he sounded more forsaken than insane, full of desperate gratitude for a woman to talk with, who valued his opinion on anything, and she tried not to think of what he must look like, smell like, his skin a burnt patchwork of self-made sores.

She tried not to think of his inevitable fate.

So through the ragged clouds of snow and hostility they had driven to Boston, had gotten a hotel room, had acquired maps and charted out what was where. And if Clay wasn't with Patrick Valentine after all, if he had instead disappeared into the frozen mists like the misbegotten outcast of Mary Shelley's most famous novel, well … perhaps it really would be time to pack in their best intentions and head for home. For the mountains, then the desert.

"Five more minutes," Adrienne said. "Then we'll check."

"Okay."

"Maybe they're asleep. You know the kind of hours he keeps, sometimes."

"I know," said Sarah. "I know."

She reached across to massage the back of Adrienne's neck. In her lap was paper and pen, resting upon the flat of a book, with which she had whiled away their forty-five-minute stakeout. Sarah had filled it with experimental addresses for herself, seeing the way her name looked conjoined with cities and states all over the country: *Sarah Lynn McGuire, 123 Fogbound St., Eugene, OR. Sarah Lynn McGuire, 456 Potato Lane, Boise, ID.* She did this sometimes, in coffeehouses and comedy clubs, did it the way others doodled stick figures or hearts or future fortunes, Sarah indulging basic wanderlust. "You never know," Adrienne once heard her tell someone who didn't understand, "maybe I'll write one and it'll be like a

talisman. I'll look at it and the match will be so perfect, I'll just know it's a place I have to be."

I want to go to these places, too, Adrienne thought now. *However many may seize you, I want to try them on with you and see how they fit us both.* She really hoped she meant that, would mean it tomorrow and next week and a year from now, and that it wasn't just the wintry miles of failure and desolation talking.

"Okay," Adrienne said. "Time's up."

She put the car into gear, rolled ahead and down the street, to the house that Valentine built. They got out and picked their way along the front walk, up to the dark-windowed, two-story Cape Cod. Beneath its snowy blanket it looked sinister, she decided, as if it had something to hide.

"I had an optimistic thought," she said quietly, watchful. "If Clay's been here, now that he's made the trip and confronted his unknown, maybe it satisfied something in him and he'll be ready to leave."

Sarah nodded and raised one hand, pulling off her mitten so Adrienne could see her crossed fingers.

They mounted the porch. Rang the doorbell, and when that failed to rouse anyone, began to pound until she realized, no, no one was here, and selfishly, this brought relief. They retraced their steps, and she wondered if Valentine — or Clay — might later notice their prints and wonder like paranoiacs about what mysterious pair had come knocking.

"Well, there's always the other place downtown," Sarah said. "We could see if that's still going." She tossed a hasty snowball at Adrienne before she could regain the shelter of the car. "If we time it right, maybe they'll even invite us to stay for dinner."

Thirty-Six

The world was full of asylums, all kinds: those into which you were committed, those you carried around inside, those you let others build for you. Clay watched the first flakes of late afternoon snow drifting past the nineteenth floor and wondered if Valentine even realized what he had created here: just another asylum.

Though it was not without its appeal. At the moment the woody resin scent of marijuana smoke hazed the air. In this asylum they prescribed their own drugs and Valentine didn't seem to mind. A chromo mute could surrender here, trudge out onto the balcony like a beaten pontiff and tell the world, *Enough, you win, I'll never be what you want, only what you deserve,* then come back inside and wait to age another day.

He and Valentine had dropped by two hours ago, a follow-up to last night's visit, and this time Ellie's gaze lingered on his eyes instead of looking him up and down as a whole specimen. Just beyond her, Daniel Ironwood was taking in every move, and had wandered up even before Clay got his field jacket off, taller by a couple of inches and making sure Clay knew it.

"I meant to ask last night, what happened to your face?" Daniel pointed to the raggedly parallel scabs.

"I cut myself eating," Clay told him.

Ellie appeared borderline sympathetic. "Those look painful as hell," then she shot a sporting glance at Daniel that he missed seeing. "I could kiss it to make it better, but Patrick says you don't like to be touched."

Daniel straightened, striving for still more height, crossed his arms before his chest. "Why don't you get it over with and kiss his ass instead?"

"Well *that's* half-profound." She scruffed both hands across the cropped sidewalls of her hair and up through the length, as if she were about to pull it out. "Look, *Jeopardy!* should be on TV in a few minutes. If you want, I'll be happy to spend some more quality time with you, and if you're really really nice between now and then, this time I promise not to count how many times your lips move and no sound comes out."

"Fuck you," and Daniel stalked off down the hall toward the bathroom.

"Yeah, that's what you're being paid for, isn't it?" Ellie called over his shoulder. "Maybe I should tell Patrick I'm not quite getting his money's worth."

The bathroom door slammed and Valentine stood gloating, as if everything were some grand joke that he had told with perfect timing, and then Ellie turned to him and began to complain of how brutal Daniel had been last night, and she had no reason to believe he would alter his tactics.

"It's only for tonight and tomorrow night," Valentine said, "and after that you don't have to see him if you don't want to. You can put up with him for two more nights."

Clay supposed it was at this point that he began to think, *Wait, there's something going on here I don't know about, something he's not telling me,* and then Ellie said that when they first met she'd actually thought Daniel was fairly sedate and even-tempered for a Helverson's guy, and Valentine smiled his tightest control-freak smile.

"If you need somebody to blame," he said, "blame Clay. Daniel just thought he was coming in for the same casual sex he's always had. But now? Now he's taking a lot more personal interest in sowing that seed. He can't help it, it's sperm competition."

"Could you be a little more manipulative, is that possible?" Ellie twirled one finger around a strand of hair and plucked it out. "Anyway, I'm not looking to blame anybody, all I want is for Daniel to quit acting like he's trying to crack my pelvis in two."

"Then go back and start being nice to him. Get him to quit sulking in the bathroom."

She barked another of her strange, incredulous laughs. "He went in by himself, let *him* decide when he wants to come out. Why should *I* have to coax him?"

Valentine took a step forward and leaned into Ellie's face. "Because if you don't, I'll blacken your eye," then he reached beneath his cable-knit sweater to draw out a gun that Clay hadn't realized he'd been carrying, a heavy revolver that captivated by sheer presence and oiled, black sheen. He spun the cylinder and let the gun dangle errantly from his fist. "And if that

doesn't move you, then we'll play the game again, like we did that one time."

Ellie drew herself together, very cool, very aloof, her lips compressing into an expression almost prim as she regarded him for a few moments. "Okay, Patrick. You can have it your way." She began to scoot toward the hall. "You always do."

And when Clay followed Valentine over to sit with him in the living room it wasn't so much that he wanted to, as that he hoped for some explanation that would shed full light on this nineteenth floor cuckoo's nest. Certainly he didn't belong here, and probably he would have left by now if he had anywhere to go, anything to do … any reason to leave and live *for*. He was beginning to get a distinct feeling of being used, rather than educated.

"What *is* this all about, here?" Clay asked. "What is it you want out of those two?"

And when Valentine began to rhapsodize about conception, and breeding stock, and what might the offspring be like parented by not one but *two* Helverson's subjects, it seized Clay's imagination with a dread so palpable he really feared he might be ill.

Helverson's times two? Helverson's squared? Or might the result be a mutation fouler still, never before seen, never anticipated, grotesque potency distilled through the generations.

"You'd do that to some kid *deliberately*?" he whispered.

What a horrible thing, what a perfectly horrible thing, and he recalled those times with Erin when they had lain in bed and the thought of siring a child was the worst act he could think of, the worst crime he could commit upon innocence, even upon a world as corrupt as he knew theirs to be.

"You're a monster. You're a complete monster." It might have stung the man, for while he didn't flinch, he cocked his head to one side almost as if he didn’t comprehend. It might have hurt him … but it was so hard to tell.

Clay stood to turn his back on the man, nearly stumbling on his way to the sliding balcony door, where he leaned against the glass and stared at the snow beginning to fall. When he heard Valentine behind him he knew if the guy so much as rested a hand on his shoulder, that would be it, he would go for his eyes.

"No. I'm not," was all the man said, all he did. "I'm just the first."

But there Clay stayed, Valentine leaving him be, an hour or more passing as life went on too slowly, as Ellie and Daniel came back and seemed at truce, and one of them asked, "So what's wrong with him?" but went unanswered. They began to smoke from her stash, peace pipe maybe, and Clay watched the leaden sky go darker with the first gloom of dusk.

Then he heard something he had never expected to hear, not in this place, with all four of them as isolated from one another as they were from the world at large:

He heard the doorbell.

*

Adrienne's gaze fell naturally upon Clay as soon as they were let in. Fifteen feet away, across this penthouse apartment, there was true pain in what she saw: *Oh, he's worse,* he'd not weathered the trip north well at all. Only three days had passed since she'd seen him, but he appeared thinner, paler, his eyes burning gray hollows. The only genuine color in him came from the savaging he had given the side of his face: the red badge of desperation.

Only then did she truly notice the others.

She thought, oddly, of their brief discussion about Salvador Dali, wondering if Sarah did likewise, for here was surrealism: encountering four faces so wholly similar, staring back. It was academic to see pictures; visceral to enter a home and see a quartet in which individuality appeared sacrificed to a prevailing stigma.

She caught her breath. See them, and one could find it too easy to believe in a purpose underlying their births. Given the suspicion and hostility in at least some of those eyes, perhaps it was precisely as Clay had said. There was something eerily more than human in all those streamlined faces turned her way, like lizards catching sound of a threat.

"Are you sure you're in the right place?" the girl asked. Ellie. Her name, Timothy had said, was Ellie.

"No doubt." Sarah took another step, hands fisted into the slash pockets of her down vest. "There's no other place like this, is there?"

Across the room, their elder rose from the chair in which he seemed to have been brooding for a while. Patrick Valentine had a glare that could cause ulcers.

"Who are you?" he asked.

Adrienne lifted her hand toward Clay, framed against a glass door, a skyline, a thickening snowfall. "I've been Clay's doctor since September."

"Rand. Oh, right." Valentine spared Clay a perfunctory glance, then regarded her with dismissal. "How proud you must be. He looks wonderful."

She ignored him, or tried, because he was obviously the sort of man who would miss nothing, who understood what would hurt and how to exploit it, a man who knew where all the nerves lay. *Don't listen to him.* There was only Clay here, she decided, and spoke his name but nothing more, for everything had abandoned her. All logic, all persuasion … gone.

But maybe it was better this way. Maybe she belonged mute. She needed to say nothing for Clay to see how far she had come, how low she had fallen. He would realize why they had come — that no matter what he did, she still refused to let hope die.

It should have been a simple decision for him. He obviously had come here and found more unhappiness than answers.

And yet…

He hesitated.

"Do we need to talk," she said, finding resolve, "or would that even do any good any more?"

"It's not that simple," said Clay, and why did he insist on making it so difficult for himself? Couldn't he for once just admit the mistake and redress it by taking the quick way out? But no, he couldn't bring himself to make it that easy.

Sarah caught her eye then, Sarah sad and emptying right there beside her. *It's us,* Adrienne realized. *It's the way he sees us, to him we must seem so complete together, that to be with us magnifies every bit of stability and unity he's lacking. He's reminded of it every moment he's with us, and he doesn't see the disagreements or the squabbles, but even if he did it might make everything even more genuine, because he'd realize they never last long…*

It's us. We're as much at fault as anyone.

Sarah fumbled blindly for her hand, ever intuitive, sensing that sudden failure in her. She took a step forward to pick up the slack.

"As long as you never see the sun," she said, with a smile — if anyone could turn his awful pallor into a gentle joke it was Sarah — "would

you like to come back with us as a consultant? I've got this wild idea for part of my thesis, I want to go looking for cave paintings in old shut-down factories, and you're the only expert I know."

Clay's face softened, wistful, transported to another day. He looked almost hopeful. "Where are you going to start?"

Sarah shrugged. "South Dakota, maybe? If you think it's worth the trip. I figure it's worth a look."

Adrienne didn't immediately catch on. South Dakota? Then the memory fired: *Where Erin went home to,* and if Sarah was the one to talk Clay down from here instead of her, fine, more power to her, whatever worked. And it appeared that she really might, for he looked upon Sarah with as much trust as she had ever seen him grant.

None of which was lost on Valentine. He would look for these weaknesses as a rule. Soft underbellies were made to be torn.

"And what then, Clay, a week from now, a month?" he said. "Is she going to marry you? You think you're going to set up some happy home in the mountains? Raise *normal* babies?"

Adrienne stared. *Whatever's passed between the two of them ... Valentine doesn't understand it at all. He can't read it right because he's probably never had a friend in his life.*

"If you think anything even remotely like that is going to happen for you," Valentine said, "you're living in a fantasy world that'll destroy you when you get burned out of it."

Bristling, Sarah appeared to have had about enough. "You're the last man on earth to lecture anyone on fantasy worlds," she told him. "You're the little man behind the curtain in Oz."

Against the near wall, Ellie stuttered into laughter, and the other man — Adrienne wasn't even sure which one this was — turned on her with alarm, *Shut up, shut UP!* in his taut features. Adrienne had almost made a similar observation, but to Sarah alone, discreetly. How ironic: All day Sarah had been the one to preach caution, to fret about Adrienne angering this Machiavellian tyrant.

"I'll take my chances," said Clay, and moved toward his coat.

Valentine nodded, muscles bunching in his jaw. "Chance is the stuff of life."

It happened very abruptly.

Clay was halfway to his coat when Valentine went kinetic, empty hand plunging beneath his sweater and emerging full, mighty as Thor with a hammer. He swung out the revolver's cylinder, and no one could have missed hearing the clicking metallic whir as he spun it. Pivoting then, slapping the cylinder back into place and raising his hand, he thrust the pistol forward as if he were launching a javelin, every motion so smooth and fluid that Adrienne was not so much frightened as insanely curious to know how often he had *practiced* this.

"Snake in the grass!" he shouted as the gun reached its apex, which made no sense to her at all. She met his eyes, and no one could have looked more surprised than Valentine when the gun blasted out a single devastating shot. At once he erupted with a triumphant whoop.

With every sense raw, unguarded, sensation became immense. The sound of bullet striking skin was orchestral; the blood that splashed her felt scalding. The hand clutching her arm was a fearsome claw, and she looked over, looked down, to see the side of Sarah's throat.

Gone. Just gone.

Together they fell, Sarah's weight dragging her down. Sarah began to choke before they hit the floor, her eyes gaping and glazed in disbelief. An anemic cry warbled past Adrienne's lips as her hands trembled, then groped in a frantic attempt to staunch the flood from Sarah's throat. It sprayed, it flowed. It pulsed and gushed.

Adrienne scrabbled to her knees beside Sarah, cradled her as the mad clawing desperation in Sarah's fingers resigned to a tender stroking. They could say nothing to each other now. Words took time, and were imprecise at best, never enough to hold everything that must be said when they are needed most.

A falling shadow: Adrienne looked up in reflex — to defend Sarah’s last ragged breath? — but it was Clay falling along her other side. Coming not to steal this terminal moment but to share it. He reached, an arm sliding beneath Sarah as he helped bear the weight that had grown so slack. With his other hand he touched her face. Through the chill of shock she was aware of it, aggrieved eyes crinkling for a moment, and with a blood-slicked hand she reached for Clay's cheekbone. He did not flinch.

He's touching, Adrienne thought, the only lucid flicker in awareness that otherwise wailed. Then: *Why does it take a catastrophe before it*

happens…?

Adrienne embraced Sarah, clutched her, felt the blood wash down her front and tried to impart her will even though it never work: *Live, you, just another moment, just another lifetime, just long enough to hear me say I loved you. Live.*

Adrienne raised her head, sacrificing a precious second to look about the room — could anything be done, could anyone *help*? — but there was nothing for her beyond the sight of three others, immobile, doppelgangers all, watching someone die.

A moment that came too soon. By decades.

The silence was total, its own world as she clung to Sarah's last bubbling breath, the final tremulous beat of her heart, the last pulse of blood. If anyone took these from her, she would show no mercy.

Ellie was first to break the silence, with a sickened cry that ripped free as if it had been trapped for minutes. She shook her head in denial, then lurched back to the bedroom, bathroom. It sounded as if she picked up speed as she went, and whether she retched or sobbed once there, it was not clear.

Like a broken appendage, her companion followed, backing out of the room while pulling off a pair of dark round lenses. Gone, then, and nothing else moved but Adrienne's lowering head.

So it had come to this.

Clay fell aside, sitting heavily on his rump with elbows on knees, head in hands. His breath came swift and shallow, about to hyperventilate.

Is this what it's like to be you? she wondered. *With nothing left inside or out to go on?*

How did he do it? How ever had he done it all these years?

Valentine had sat again, on the edge of his chair, so wholly absorbed in the moment that he appeared transported. His face bore the look of artists who have achieved the breakthrough to aesthetic perfection, who have transcended themselves and ride a moment that felt eternal. Adrienne knew that he would never again feel this alive.

Hate him? He was too alien to truly hate.

She fell inward again, the first real sob working its way up, scarcely aware that Clay had risen and walked from the room. He barely touched the floor, gliding, may have been gone a moment, maybe an hour, and when she

glimpsed him again he had returned from the kitchen, flowing with smooth even purpose, a mongoose to the cobra.

She opened her mouth, mute, and what a mistake to think that she had no heart left to break.

His first slashing blow with the butcher knife caught Patrick Valentine across the forehead, opening a deep split that rained a sheet of blood across his eyes, blinding him. Two-handed, Clay plunged it down into the meat of one shoulder, then the other. The gun went thumping to the floor, and a moment later Valentine fell atop it, as Clay bore after him with a brutality primordial and relentless. His face was gone, replaced by the visage of carnivores that rolled in the spoor of their prey.

"No, no, stop, don't do that," she murmured, crawling over Sarah and slipping along on all fours until, midway there, her strength giving way to shock, she sprawled upon the floor while Clay swung the knife, and plunged it, and gouged it, and twisted it, never once looking up from the task at hand —

*

— until it was finished, forever and ever.

So here the journey ended. He could see it now, unspooled behind him. From Denver through the deserts to Tempe, then back again. To the brink of mountains and down once more, through the mounting losses, then across frozen wastes. To the savannahs within and, finally, north. All the while, sliding down the coil of the double helix, until here he was, a new being. No, not new — *complete*, the killer he had always been destined to be.

The inevitable quit trying so hard to impose itself, once it was accepted.

And if there were regrets, they were only for the innocent. For Sarah, and for Adrienne too, because she had dared believe he was redeemable. She had deserved better.

She had never had a chance.

Dripping, he rose from the corpse of Patrick Valentine, got as far as his knees before he saw Adrienne's eyes. In shock, she was, trembling and chilled. He knew the look, but had not realized just how horrible a creature he must truly be until he saw the judgment on her face.

He fetched a silken comforter from the sofa and draped it over her, so she might stay warmer. Stripped away his shirt, his pants and the rest, for he, conversely, was burning alive.

Knife in hand, he trod down the hall.

Their existence was intolerable, of course. He had known this all along, had tried to fight it, had tried to see it as another of nature's simple ways that were indifferent to the outcome. Much less deserving life forms than they had met with extinction; he would do his part.

Daniel Ironwood he found in the bathroom, trying with nervous hands to light more to smoke. He dropped his paraphernalia when he saw Clay, naked and bloodied, and the knife was swift to fall. They grappled down along a peach-hued wall, a towel bar coming free, with which Daniel managed to strike a bruising blow along Clay's collarbone. He sank the knife through Daniel's lower abdomen and hung on despite the sudden burst of fetid odor. Knife grated bone, and together they twitched, and Daniel wept as his struggles grew feeble. Then nonexistent.

Oh, how he had wanted to live.

Ellie he found in the bedroom, sitting on her bed and drawn into a tight ball. He'd thought she might be the fiercest of the three, yet here she had all but surrendered, and he supposed no one was really as tough as they let on.

And Ellie knew him, knew his heart as well as he did.

"I can't help what I am," she whispered, and would neither tremble nor cry. Nor beg.

"None of us can," he said, and proved to himself just how wrong Valentine had been last night on the balcony, on the theory and practice of killing.

The third one is by far the hardest.

*

He made his way back to the living room, where Adrienne had not moved. He was spent by now. All the days, all the miles, too little sleep and precious little food — he was consuming himself from the inside. He had glimpsed his body in a mirror back there and it had looked wasted.

He fell into Valentine's chair, one foot on the man himself, and used the remote to turn on the television. Flipped around but found nothing of redemption so he turned it off. The silence left a yawning void.

Adrienne was watching him from the floor, not so certain that her own turn wasn't coming next — or so her gaze struck him — and he knew he had done far worse than kill her already. The thought made him cry and he hurled the knife away, down the hall.

Clay slid to the floor, crawled to her, and from beneath the comforter one arm extended. She raised herself enough so that they were able to fit together, her head resting against his shoulder, sticky though it now was. An arm around him next, and a hand upon his knee.

But it was no good. Despite everything, the old sour repugnance had returned already, his skin crawling beneath her hands. *What is it,* he wondered, *they've got to be dead first?*

Adrienne seemed to sense it, perhaps a stiffening across his shoulders, and she pulled away with a single downcast nod. Content to brush two fingertips against his chest, as much as he was able to tolerate.

"So many scars," she said. "It's too late. Isn't it?"

"We tried. So the scars won anyway. We tried." As if that were supposed to be some consolation.

He crawled away from her, rubbing the scar on his forehead, from early November. Twelve stitches, it had taken? What an amateur. He could do better than that, and crawled toward the marble table.

I want to live in a different world, he had told Adrienne weeks ago, and if he had seen only the worst of worlds, it did not mean he had abandoned hope entirely.

There would be a better world, somewhere, there must be. He would find it, that world where he could touch Erin's face and whisper her name as many times as she wished to hear it, and know that he could love her without reservation. That world where she could touch him lavishly and his skin would not reject any hand that was not brutal enough to bruise. This place, it *had* to exist — this could not be all there was.

Anything but that.

He knelt before marble, its smooth rock edge become the ledge upon the precipice. Eyes gone blurry, he stared down until he was one with the stone, its mottled gray and black a universe. It beckoned.

He answered.

He whipped his head down, let his brow crack across marble, and the inside of his skull went white and vast. Skin split; he was as blind as

Valentine at the end. Clay reeled, rising up onto both knees, face tipped to an unseen sky, Icarus flying too high. He whipped his head down again, harder than before, all his strength this time, and forever he fell … from the eye of the sun, from the pain of a frozen moon…

Falling from grace.

*

And she was alone.

Clay's head had twice hit with a sound like a bursting melon, and the second time he crumpled to the floor, bleeding from a forehead gone sickly concave. In his boneless heap he twitched with convulsive spasms until they shorted themselves out, then fell still but for shallow breaths.

Adrienne found a phone and punched out 911, let the receiver tumble to the floor when it became obvious she had no voice for the task. They would trace it; they would come.

But she couldn’t wait until then, could no longer breathe the air of this slaughterhouse, so with the last of her ebbing strength she dragged Sarah across to the glass door. Dragged her onto the balcony, to huddle with her beneath the comforter in the farthest corner, under the chilly kiss of falling snow.

Sightless eyes, she closed them. Silent lips, she kissed them. Braided hair, she stroked it. She raised Sarah's sweater and caressed her navel, still healing from the ring that pierced it, and she kissed that as well.

And then? Just held her, until rougher hands would inevitably pry them apart.

Her face running with melting snowflakes, she thought of the rainstick left far behind. If she had it here, she would slam it upon the railing, break it open and let its pebbles and bone chips cascade to the street below.

Sarah would approve, at least, and understand.

Nineteen floors up, while down in the street they all walked past at the end of their workday, and none of them had a clue what went on above. So Adrienne settled back and began to shiver, waiting for the sirens but never quite sure when they arrived.

That was the trouble. There were always sirens.

PART FOUR/DUST OF A FADED DECADE

"But it is even so; the fallen angel becomes a malignant devil. Yet even that enemy of God and man had friends and associates in his desolation; I am alone."

— Mary Shelley

Frankenstein

Thirty-Seven

He had lost sight of the past, wondering if for every year he spent distancing himself from civilization, those memories had not become more and more like some vestigial organ that had withered to a nub, to someday drop away entirely. The primitives, he had heard it said, possessed no true sense of time, past and future only the broadest of conceits, sacrificed to a raw and overwhelming now.

Was he, in part, proving the theorists right, bridging that gap by becoming a living atavism? Would that no one ever got the opportunity to find out. He had tried their route; he'd been there before.

As for the route he *had* chosen, its first steps he scarcely remembered; they seemed as unimportant as his name, his lineage. Once even dirt roads have been forsaken in favor of desert vistas and high crags, one can wander for years without need of the past. It made no one any less human.

He could no longer recall how he had found himself here, but some nights, when on the verge of sleep with rocks at his back and the fire at his front, he stirred with the idea that something must have been terribly painful long ago, when he was young, with fewer scars, and that it was better left in a world given up for dead. Memories were sly things, not to be trusted, for their faces could change so over time. Treacherous change he did not need. Better he immerse himself in something stable and endless, a place that time could never defile, because what was time but a sense of order imposed by human hands?

A desert was such a place.

To the Gobi he had come, drawn by its call, its immensity, by everything it promised not to be. It offered neither truth nor lies, it simply *was*, and that was all he asked for. That, and the fulfillment of some tale he knew he had heard, with reason to believe, but far enough ago that its teller had been lost to him.

Once upon a time he had heard of the *almas*, and their story lay lodged within him so deeply it might have been a memory planted for the sole purpose of sending him to an elder world in which hours had no

meaning. A world in which lives progressed by days and nights, by the passing of the seasons and the cycles of the moon. He needed no more clock than these.

Deserts he crossed and mountains he climbed, nourished by the land and that with which it teemed. Old clothes tore and rotted and fell away to be replaced by hardier skins, while his head and face sprouted with hair thicker than any he had known before. It must have been years that he wandered, that he climbed, and his feet grew tough and his hands callused, and his voice grew vast with the song of primeval solitude. He was earth and wind and sky and water. He was beast and dream.

And the *almas* waited.

He loved them long before he saw them, knowing that whatever they were, when he found them it would not matter. Be they hermits of folklore, or the descendants of feral children, or some dead-end evolutionary branch, prototypes of humanity with all their potential intact, who lived now as forgotten anachronisms. They were as wrong for the world he had abandoned as he was himself — he remembered that much, too, not quite recalling the problem, only sure of one thing: *I am not like others, not like others.*

He roamed the slopes and plateaus, and sometimes he would find the remains of their fires — more than once still warm, he was but hours behind them — and the bones of their kills, picked clean. In the shelter of caves he would find evidence of their lingering, earthen pigments used to pay homage to a mighty bisonlike creature that would surely die a very hard death. In all his years up here he had seen no such animal, and it was a long time before he realized: *They passed it down. They remember what used to be, as a people, if not as individuals. This is how they keep it alive because if they let it die, a part of them dies too.*

He wished that where he'd come from they had known things like that.

So he followed, but the *almas* were as elusive as they were nomadic, as shy as their legends said. There were times when he began to wonder if he were becoming somehow incorporated into their folklore. And why not, they must have found him a creature of sufficient mystery: a solitary being with a strangely shaped head but clothing not unlike their own, who walked

in fog and left lonely tracks in the snow. Perhaps they thought him a spirit, or a god. Or a demon.

He knew only that they seemed to grow to trust him, allowing him to get closer and closer over the years before turning and melting into the hillsides. Half a mile became a quarter, became an eighth, until as little as fifty yards might separate them, and the *almas* would stand immobile, stocky and powerful atop a hill, silhouetted against a sky of blue, or gray, or sunset red. They would stare at one another through mists and rains and burning suns, but the *almas* would always vanish before he could walk in on their camp.

Still, he took their small tokens as encouragement to keep trying, objects they could not have left behind by accident in their haste to flee. A soft-furred pelt, a flint knife, a clutch of wild flowers lashed by rawhide to a bone. Such gifts he came to cherish, whether they were left in simple trade, or in appeasement driven by awe.

So he followed, and dreamt of the day when they would no longer run from him, and he began to imagine fathering a child, the idea no longer repellent, as it had seemed long ago. What might such a child be like? Perhaps, backward as the *almas* were, that which was best in them might cancel out what was worst in him, and so the child — or children — could grow to be something new, better than either of them, a more worthy survivor.

If only they would let him get closer, close enough to touch.

They had to; this could not be all there was.

And, too, if only that damned blazing star would quit searing from the sky to blind him at the most inopportune moments —

*

"Pupillary response … none."

The results were always the same, year after year — shine a penlight into his eyes and it might as well have been shone down a mineshaft. Pupils fixed, pursuant to damage to the frontal lobe, she'd been told more than once; patient catatonic. He had, for the greater part of a decade, not uttered a single word, nor focused his eyes on anything in his field of vision, nor reacted to one sound around him. It was as if Clay Palmer had simply gone away.

Each summer Adrienne flew northeast to visit her parents in their retirement on Prince Edward Island. From there it was a simple matter to drop down to Logan Airport in Boston, then rent a car and drive out to Worcester to visit with Clay in the state hospital that had been the longest-lived home of his adult life.

Never had he given any indication of being aware of her, but she visited anyway, hoping against experience that in the year since her last visit he might have shown some meager improvement. Always a disappointment, though, and Adrienne supposed by the time she was forty she had given up hope, had accepted, and, all things considered, was grateful that Clay had grown no worse.

He had, ironically, managed to keep his youth over the years, his skin still smooth as a twenty-five-year-old's because he never used it and it never saw the sun. His impassive countenance became a living museum exhibit of Helverson's syndrome, worst-case scenario, the streamlined bones no longer going anywhere. And as fine lines circumscribed her mouth, crossed her forehead, circled her eyes, she began to resent his stasis. *Age, damn you!* — a fool's command, and she thought of spending hours folding his face with wrinkles in hope that at least a few might take root. It wasn't fair; he was thwarting her in body as well as mind.

Although it wasn't as if he looked perfect, now, was it? She thought it terrible the way they kept his hair trimmed so short in this place, for easy maintenance, when they should have let it fall unruly over his brow. It would at least conceal that broadly scarred concavity across his forehead.

In a dayroom alive with the shufflings and mutterings of his ward mates — a chamber that took her back to her duties on Ward Five — she would spend a full afternoon with Clay, sitting with him at a table and for a time trying to penetrate his never-ending stare. *Where did you go?* she would think, sometimes even feeling a tweak of jealousy because his surrender to it was so complete. It denied her everything.

She would then take to conversation that was entirely one-sided, wondering if anything was getting through. Giving him updates on her life because she didn't know what else to talk about — she should reminisce about all the fun times they'd had? — and she would reveal herself in a peculiar role-reversal she had never anticipated. Clay sat like the perfect

therapist, never a word, a pale iconic presence whose silence only prompted her to go on, find something else, there must be more.

He heard of changes in locale. Tempe had understandably gone sour, Sarah everywhere she looked and many places she didn't, and so she had tried Albuquerque but hadn't fit; perhaps her need for the desert was no more. For now it was San Diego and holding. Probably she had come to her oceanic phase, in love with saltwater and the security of the tides.

He heard of lovers present and past, of Karen and Sally and Adam; of the brief marriage to Geoff, which ended in amicable defeat. She thought to try celibacy for a time but had fallen off that wagon in four months. He heard of Val and Franz and Melanie, and others, and after a time she began to think, *I see him once a year and I'm still probably boring him, because it always sounds the same. Only the names have been changed to protect the wounded.*

And she remembered when she could love, easily, eagerly, and wondered what was wrong, why none of them ever seemed *right*, why they would invariably drift apart. It should be easy to find someone, the advantage was hers — after all, she had the whole of both sexes to choose from.

She confessed this to Clay, but if he knew what the problem was he wasn't saying.

She would sit and hold his hand sometimes, taking it as her pathetic triumph that he no longer pulled away. Wherever he had gone, she could never follow, and so she took to making up inner lives just so she might pretend she knew: He had found a family, or a lover he could never drive away, or a womb in which he curled, bathed in all the potential that might yet be fulfilled.

Life is a short dream, the ancient Romans had said, and so once a year she would stay through late afternoon, and kiss him on the cheek, and wish him godspeed on his.

While she went back out and tried to make sense of her own.

In the ninth year of his stay Adrienne left as she always did — a little sad, a little relieved, a little fearful over the thought of how her life might change, or mightn't, in the year to come before her next visit. Annual rituals were harsh that way, always forcing your head around to face the future. She took the elevator down to ground level, sharing it with several others to

whom she paid no mind. Its doors slid open and all of them went about their lives.

Adrienne was halfway to the door when she realized that one of them seemed to be trailing her. Surely not, though. It must be coincidence.

"It's good of you to come every year, way you do," the man said as they stepped through the doors of the hospital and began to descend terraced steps toward the parking lots. "It's a fine thing you don't forget him."

She stopped on the concrete walkway and turned. The speaker was an elderly man, once tall but now mostly withered, with a stern face gone slack, his hair white and cropped in an old man's crew cut. He wore his old blue suit with a touchingly natty pride, and smelled of too much sweet cologne, and she had never seen him before in her life.

"Do I know you?"

"I'm…" He looked down, seemed almost embarrassed. "I'm Clayton's father. Randolph Palmer."

He seemed reluctant to shake hands, no point to such a formal gesture, for which she was glad. She might not even have been able to move her arm, when it came right down to it.

Clay's father. He must have been, what, in his early seventies now? About that. He looked it, possibly more. She found a scar on him that she'd not noticed at first, a thick ridge nesting low in the wattles on his neck. He caught her staring, mentioned getting a Purple Heart for that one, and didn't appear interested in pursuing it further.

"I been trying to catch you, this makes the fourth year," he said. "The boy doesn't have any visitors but for you and me. They told me about you a few years back, and I said to myself, 'Well, I've just got to meet her, if only the once.' It's a fine thing you remember Clay."

Adrienne got herself moving again, down the stairs and across the lot. He followed along as escort, mindful of the traffic because he seemed to realize how distracted she was.

It was like the appearance of an apparition, a visit from the ghost of Jacob Marley or Hamlet's father. Never had she pictured him, not consciously, even during the heaviest of her sessions with Clay. But deep in her heart she supposed she had painted the portrait of an ogre, a cruel and gigantic man who devoured his only son until he was nothing but scraps

and bones, then berated him because there was nothing left to take. Randolph Palmer could never have lived up to such a fearsome image, now less than ever, and she wished he had never shown her his face at all, for now she was tempted to feel sorry for him.

"Did you travel all this way just for this?" she asked.

"Wasn't anything. I don't live but a few miles from here. It's not a bad drive at all, come summer."

"I thought you lived in Minneapolis."

Randolph Palmer shrugged, scuffing along in well-worn shoes, newly polished. "I moved here seven years back, to be close to him now even if I wasn't for the years before he … well, hell, before he got this way. I suppose I could've moved him someplace back to home, you know, but … just seemed right I should leave him be and I should be the one haul up stakes."

"What about his mother?"

"Oh, she died about the same time. Her liver got too big on her." He shook his head. "You can't have that."

There's a lot you can't have, she thought, *but people do it anyway, to themselves and to each other.* So often they never learned in time. Or never learned at all, going to their graves with befuddled faces.

She led them to her rental car and stood at the door, digging in her purse for her keys as Randolph Palmer stretched, turned on run-down heels, and tipped his face to the lowering sun while gazing back toward the hospital.

"The boy always was a handful, or most of the time," and then his head lowered, sinking into the scarred wattles. He rubbed his chin with his fist, huffed with a gruff little laugh. "One time, he was four years old, must've been, he had this favorite toy. A stuffed lamb is what it was, dirty white thing, half the fuzz worn gone. He dragged it everywhere. Stupid damn toy for a boy, is what I thought. I burned the thing. Burned it and held his hand over the flame so he wouldn't want to touch one again." He shut his eyes, and for a moment she thought he might cry until he cleared his throat and put himself out of danger. "I shouldn't have done that."

Keys in hand, she tried to stand tall, taller than she felt while unlocking the car door and hoping to ignore the remorse in the man's voice. It was too late for remorse in this case. For once she wanted to be

unreservedly bitter and childish and cruel. Let her have this one bitter thing in her life, and she would keep trying to make the rest, if not sweet, at least palatable.

"I have a flight at Logan to catch," she said, but froze when she saw Randolph Palmer looking at her as she had always imagined Catholics would look at the Virgin Mary while praying to her.

"I wanted to ask you something," he said. "They came and told me even before he got like this that he had things wrong with him, things he was born with inside that didn't come from his mother or me, neither one. I know you knew him then, before. These people here, they didn't, none of them. I want you to tell me if you can … would he have ended up the way he was no matter what? I know sometimes I probably didn't raise him the way I should've, but … that wouldn't've made any difference, would it?"

She tossed her purse in through the door, cocked an elbow onto the roof as she leaned there and met Randolph Palmer's eyes. He was a needy old man, come to seek absolution in what was most likely his final chance. How many years had he wrung his knotty hands and wondered if only he had done things differently? She should have been kinder than she felt, but if the temptation was there, so too was the thought of that small hand over a burning toy lamb, and it burned *so* much brighter.

"We'll never know, will we?" she said. "I still live with that."

"What about me?" He was close to pleading. She could see behind his eyes to all the fears that pooled there, how little time he had left to make his peace with a ruined son and how little progress he had made.

"You made your bed," she told him. "Now die in it."

She left him standing on the lot, alone and small at the end of a lengthening shadow at the close of a dismal day, and for another year she drove away hoping that Clay was where he wanted to be, at last, if only in his mind. And she thought, too, of all those babies born with the identical defect. Six hundred and eighty-three, the last she had heard, but that had been nine years ago. They would be in grade school now, and for them she prayed for patient teachers and persistent friends and, most of all, parents who had not confused love with something else, something tyrannical.

She thought of the last thing she had said to Randolph Palmer, then echoed his sentiments exactly.

I shouldn't have done that.

But she did not turn around.
The damage was already done.

There are few pains as sore as once having seen, guessed, felt how an extraordinary human being strayed from his path and degenerated.

— Friedrich Nietzsche

Beyond Good and Evil

About The Author

Called “a spectacularly unflinching writer” by Peter Straub, Brian Hodge is the author of ten novels, close to 100 short stories, and three collections of short fiction. Recent books include his second crime novel, *Mad Dogs*, and his upcoming fourth collection, *Picking The Bones*.

He lives in Colorado, where he’s at work on a gigantic new novel that doesn’t seem to want to end, and distracts himself with music and sound design, photography, Krav Maga, and organic gardening.

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